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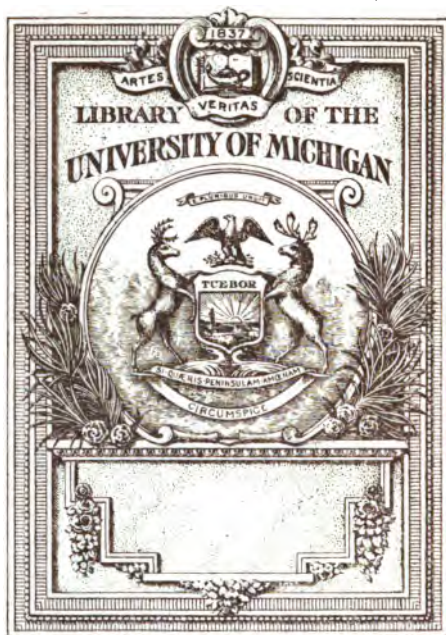
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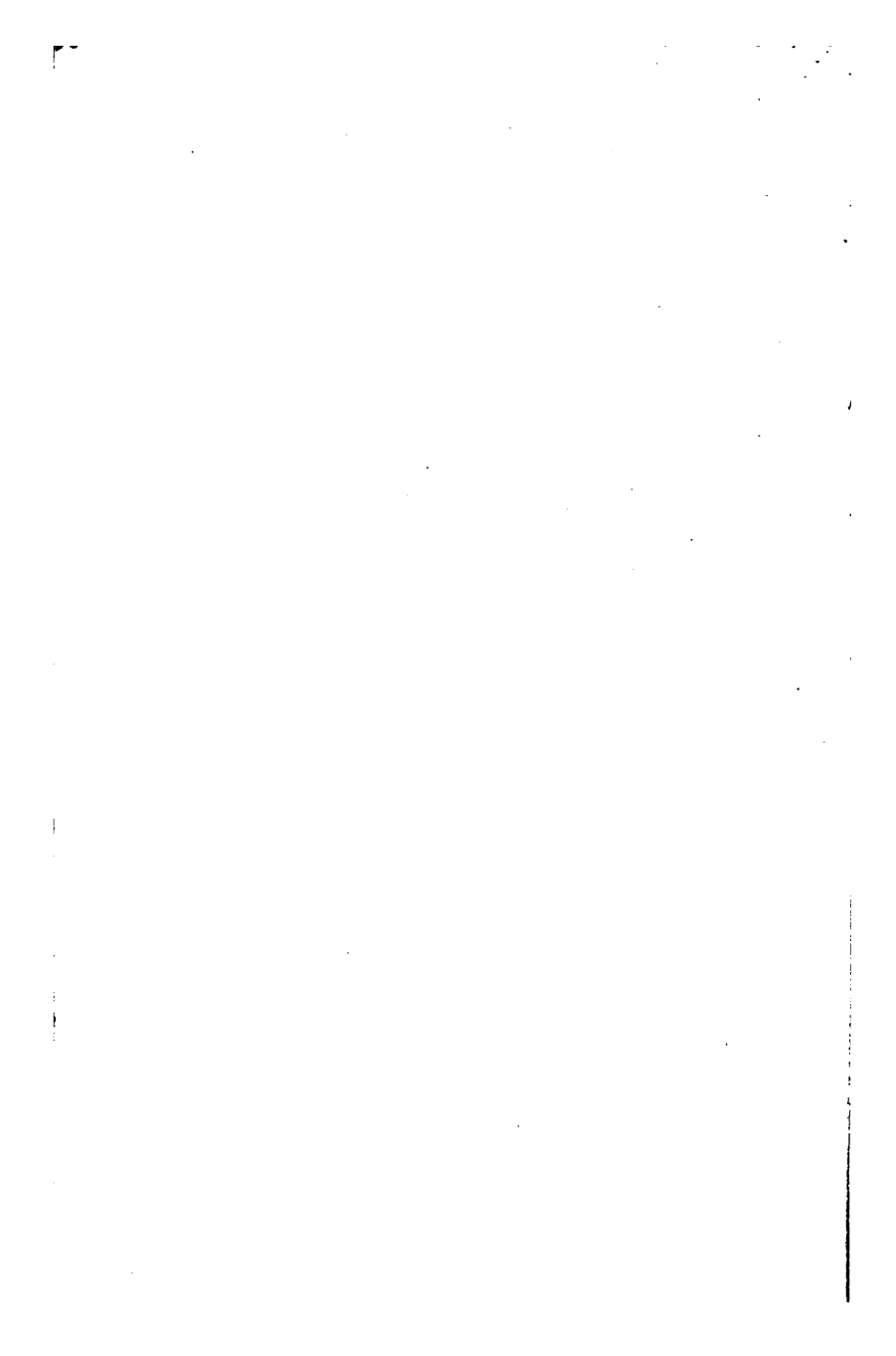
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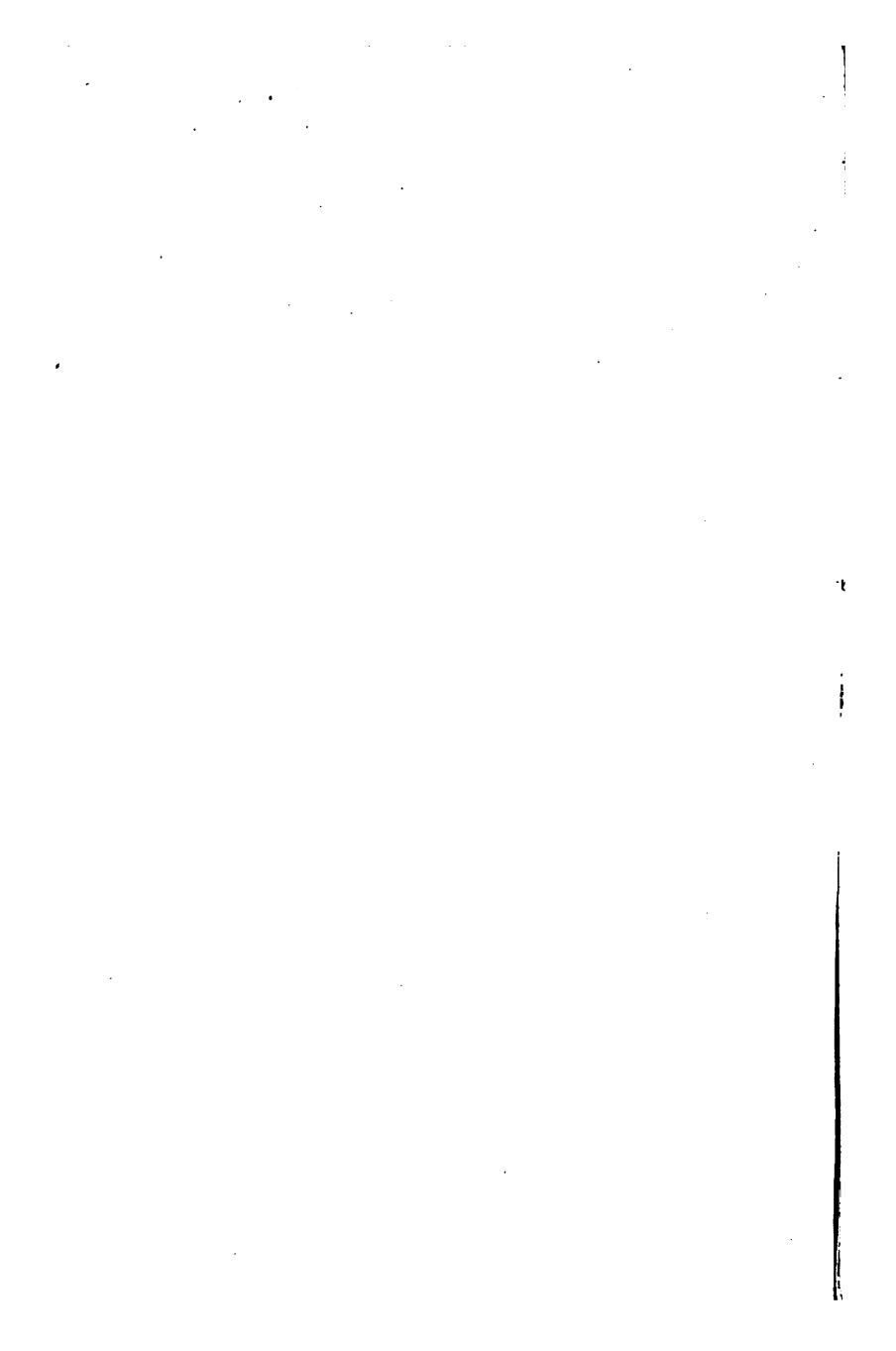
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**HILDA STRAFFORD.**



4



Yours very truly,

Beatrice Hamden





# Hilda Strafford

*A California Story*

By



Beatrice Harraden

Author of "Ships that Pass in the Night"  
"In Varying Moods"

With Illustrations by Eric Pape



New York  
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1897



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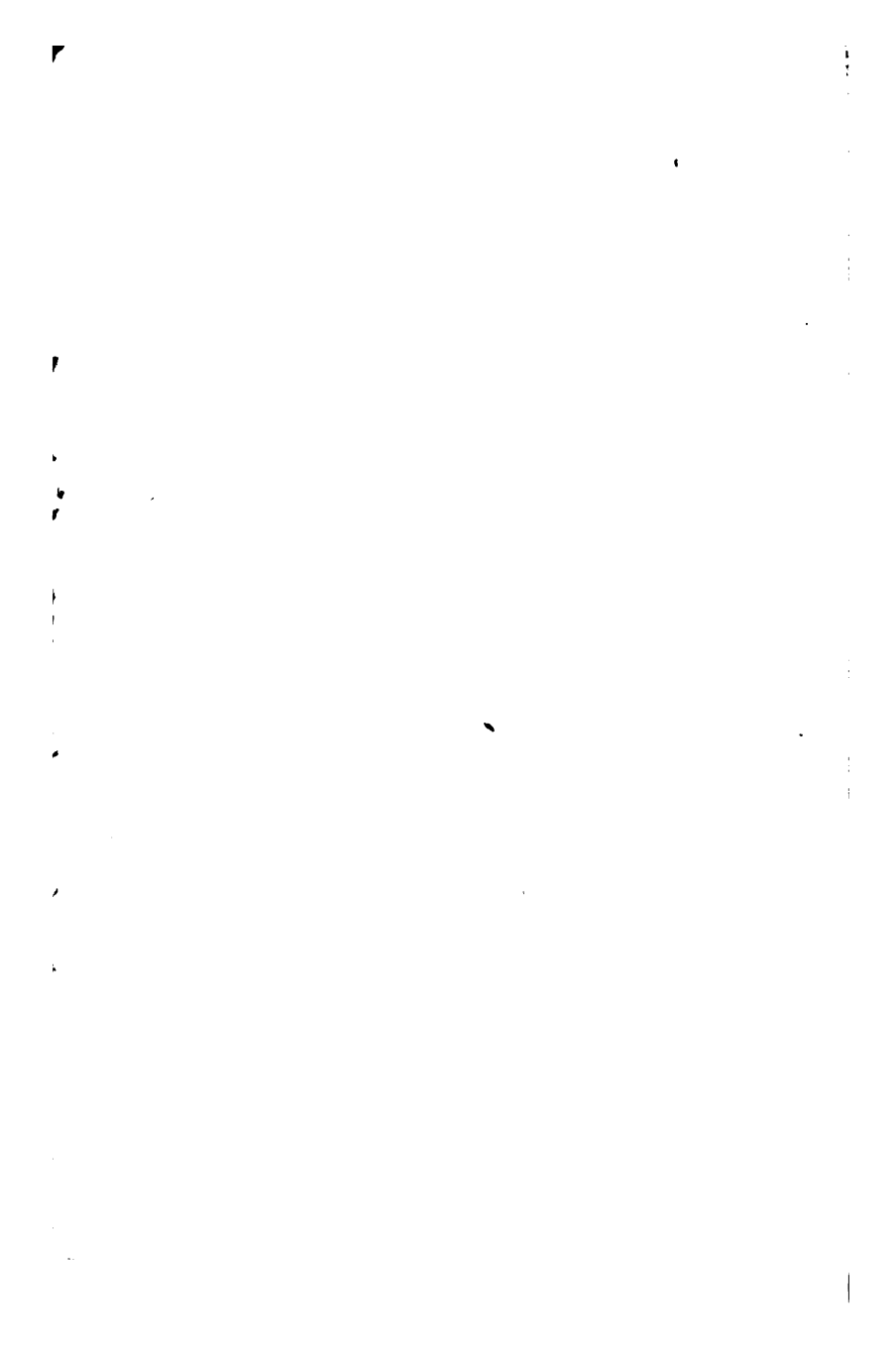
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**HILDA STRAFFORD**

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# Hilda Strafford

## CHAPTER I

WOULD IT SMILE TO HER?

THE day had come at last. Robert Strafford glanced around at the isolated spot which he had chosen for his ranch, and was seized with more terrible misgivings than had ever before overwhelmed him in moments of doubt.

Scores of times he had tried to put himself in her place, and to look at the country with her eyes. Would it, could it, smile to her? He had put off her coming until the early spring, so that she might see this

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new strange land at its best, when the rains had begun to fall, and the grass was springing up, and plain and slope were donning a faint green garment toning each day to a richer hue, when tiny ferns were thrusting out their heads from the dry ground, and here and there a wild-flower arose, welcome herald of the bounty which Nature would soon be dispensing with generous hand, but after a long delay. Such a long delay, indeed, that a newcomer to Southern California might well think that Nature, so liberal in her gifts to other lands, had shown only scant favor to this child of hers, clothing her in dusty and unattractive attire, and refusing her many of the most usual graces. But when the long months of summer heat are over, she begins to work her miracle, and those who have eyes to see and

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hearts to understand, will learn how dearly she loves this land of sunshine, and how, in her own good time, she showers her jewels upon it.

So just now, when this wonderful change was stealing over the country, Robert Strafford looked eagerly for the arrival of Hilda Lester, who had been engaged to him for more than three years, and who was at length able to break away from her home-ties and marry him ; when there was a mystic glamour in the air, and a most caressing softness ; when the lemon-trees were full of promise, and some of them full of plenty ; when the little ranch, so carefully worked and so faithfully nursed, seemed at its very best, and well repaid Robert Strafford for his untiring labor.

He sat on the bench in front of his barn, smoking his pipe and glanc-

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ing with pride at his little estate on the slope of the hill. He loved it so much, that he had learnt to think it even beautiful, and it was only now and then that he had any serious misgivings about the impression it would produce on any one unaccustomed to the South Californian scenery. But now he was seized with overwhelming doubt, and he took his pipe from his mouth, and covered his tired-looking face with his hands. Nellie, the white pointer, stirred uneasily, and then got up and rubbed herself against him.

"Dear old girl," he said, caressing her. "You have such a faithful heart. I'm all right, old girl; I'm only down in the dumps a little."

Suddenly the sound of horse's hoofs was heard, and Nellie, barking loudly, darted down the hill, and then returned in triumph, now and again

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making jumps of greeting to Ben Overleigh's pretty little chestnut mare Fanny.

Ben Overleigh swung off his horse, hitched her to the post, and turned quietly to his friend, who had not risen from the bench, but sat in the same listless position as before.

"Well, now," said Ben Overleigh, sinking down beside him, "and I tell you, Bob, you've made a deuced pretty little garden for her. That deaf old woman with the ear-trumpet has not grown finer violets than those yonder; and as for your roses, you could not find any better in Santa Barbara itself. I can't say much for the grass-plot at present. It reminds me rather of a man's bald head. But the creepers are just first rate, especially the ones I planted. And there is n't a bonnier little ranch

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than yours in the whole neighbourhood. If my lemons were coming on as well as yours, nothing on earth should prevent me from stepping over to the dear old country for a few weeks."

Robert Strafford looked up and smiled.

"The trees certainly are doing splendidly," he said, with some pride. "I know I've given them the best part of my strength and time these last three years. There ought to be some return for that, ought n't there, Ben?"

Ben made no answer, but puffed at his pipe, and Robert Strafford continued:

"You see, Hilda and I had been engaged for some time, and things did not go well with me in the old country, — I could n't make my niche for myself like other fellows

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seem able to do,—and then there came that wretched illness of mine, which crippled all my best abilities for the time. So when at last I set to work again, I felt I must leave no stone unturned to grasp some kind of a success: here was a new life and a new material, and I vowed I would contrive something out of it for Hilda and myself.”

He paused a moment, and came closer to Ben Overleigh.

“But I don’t know how I ever dared hope that she would come out here,” he said, half dreamily. “I’ve longed for it and dreaded it, and longed for it and dreaded it. If I were to have a message now to say she had thrown it up, I don’t suppose I should ever want to smile again. But that is not the worst thing that would happen to one. I

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dread something far more — her disappointment, her scorn ; for, when all is done and said, it is a wretched land, barren and bereft, and you know yourself how many of the women suffer here. They nearly all hate it. Something dies down in them. You have only got to look at them to know. They have lost the power of caring. I've seen it over and over again, and then I have cursed my lemon-trees. And I tell you, Ben, I feel so played out by work and doubt, and so over-shadowed, that if Hilda hates the whole thing, it will just be the death of me. It will kill me outright."

Ben Overleigh got up and shook himself, and then relieved his feelings in a succession of ranch-life expletives, given forth with calm deliberation and in a particularly



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musical voice, which was one of Ben's most charming characteristics. He had many others too : his strong manly presence, his innate chivalry to every one and everything, and his quiet loyalty, made him an attractive personality in the valley ; and his most original and courteous manner of swearing would have propitiated the very sternest of tract-distributors. He was a good friend, too, and had long ago attached himself to Robert Strafford, and looked after him — mothering him up in his own manly tender fashion ; and now he glanced at the young fellow who was going to bring his bride home on the morrow, and he wondered what words of encouragement he could speak, so that his comrade might take heart and throw off this overwhelming depression.

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"That's enough of this nonsense," he said cheerily, as he stood and faced his friend. "Come and show me what you've done to make the house look pretty. And see here, old man, I've brought two or three odd things along with me. I saw them in town the other day, and thought they might please her ladyship when she arrives. I stake my reputation particularly on this lamp-shade. And here's a table-cloth from the Chinese shop, and here's a vase for flowers, and here's a toasting-fork!"

They had gone into the house, and Ben Overleigh had laid his treasures one by one on the table. He looked around, and realised for the first time that Robert Strafford was offering but a desolate home to his bride. Outside at least there were flowers and creepers, and ranges

## HILDA STRAFFORD

of splendid mountains, and beautiful soft lights and shades changing constantly, and fragrances in the air born of spring; but inside this dreary little house, there was nothing to cast a glamour of cheerfulness. Nothing. For the moment Ben's heart sank, but when he glanced at his friend, he forced himself to smile approvingly.

"You've bought a capital little coal-oil stove, Bob," he said. "That is the best kind, undoubtedly. I'm going to have scores of cosy meals off that, I can tell you. I think you could have done with two or three more saucepans, old man. But that is as nice a little stove as you'll see anywhere. A rocking-chair! Good. And a cushion too, by Jove! And a book-shelf, with six brand-new books on it, including George Meredith's last novel and Ibsen's new play."

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"Hilda is fond of reading," said Robert Strafford, gaining courage from his friend's approval.

"And some curtains," continued Ben. "And a deuced pretty pattern too."

"I chose them myself," said the other, smiling proudly, — "and, what's more, I stitched them myself!"

So they went on, Ben giving comfort and Bob taking it; and then they made a few alterations in the arrangement of the furniture, and they tried the effect of the table-cloth and the lamp-shade, and Bob put a few flowers in the vase, and stood at the door to see how everything looked.

"Will it smile to her, will it smile to her, I wonder?" he said, anxiously.

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"Of course it will," said Ben, also stepping back to see the whole effect.

"That lamp-shade and that table-cloth and that vase and that toasting-fork settle the whole matter, in my mind!"

"If there were only some nice neighbours," said Robert Strafford. "But there isn't a soul within six miles."

"You are surely forgetting the deaf lady with the ear-trumpet," remarked Ben, mischievously.

"Don't be a fool, Ben," said Robert Strafford, shortly.

"She is not exactly a stimulating companion," continued Ben, composedly, "but she is better than no one at all. And then there's myself. I also am better than no one at all. I don't think you do so badly after all, in spite of your grumblings."

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Then eight miles off live Lauderdale and Holles and Graham. Since Jesse Holles returned from his travels, they are as merry a little company as you would wish to see anywhere."

"Hilda is so fond of music," said Robert Strafford, sadly, "and I have no piano for her as yet."

"That is soon remedied," answered Ben. "But why did n't you tell me these things before? The ear-trumpet lady has a piano, and I daresay with a little coaxing she would lend it to you. I'm rather clever at coaxing through a trumpet; moreover, she rather likes me. I have such a gentle voice, you know, and I believe my moustache is the exact reproduction of one owned by her dead nephew! Her dead nephew certainly must have had an uncommonly fine moustache! Well, about

## HILDA STRAFFORD

the piano. I'll see what I can do; and meanwhile, for pity's sake, cheer up."

He put his hand kindly on his friend's shoulders.

"Yes, Bob, I mean what I say," he continued; "for pity's sake, cheer up, and don't be receiving her ladyship with the countenance of a boiled ghost. That will depress her far more than anything in poor old California. Be your old bright self again, and throw off all these misgivings. You've just worked yourself out, and you ought to have taken a month's holiday down the coast. You would have come back as strong as a jack-rabbit and as chirpy as a little horned toad."

"Oh, I shall be all right," said Robert Strafford; "and you're such a brick, Ben. You've always been

## HILDA STRAFFORD

good to me. I've been such a sullen cur lately. But for all that —"

"But for all that, you're not a bad fellow at your best," said Ben, smiling; "and now come back with me. I can't have you mooning here by yourself to-night. Come back with me, and I'll cook you a splendid piece of steak, and I'll send you off in excellent form to meet and marry her ladyship to-morrow morning. Then whilst you are off on that errand, I'll turn in here and make the place as trim as a ship's cabin, and serve up a nice little dinner fit for a king and queen. Come on, old man. I half think there may be rain to-night."

"I must just water the horses," said Robert Strafford, "and then I'm ready for you."

The two friends sauntered down to



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the stables, the pointer Nellie following close upon their heels.

It was the hour of sunset, that hour when the barren scenery can hold its own for beauty with the loveliest land on earth. The lights changed and deepened, and faded away and gave place to other colours, until at last that tender rosy tint so dear to those who watch the Californian sky, jewelled the mountains and the stones, holding everything, indeed, in a passing splendour.

"Her ladyship won't see anything like that in England," said Ben; and he stooped down and picked some wild-flowers which were growing over the ranch: Mexican primroses and yellow violets.

"The ear-trumpet lady says this is going to be a splendid year for the wild-flowers," he added, "so her lady-

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ship will see California at its best. But I believe we are in for some rain. I rather wish it would keep off until she has happily settled down in her new home."

"It won't rain yet," said Robert Strafford, leading out one of the horses to the water-trough. Then Ben fetched the other one out; but he broke loose and hurried up on the hill, and Ben followed after him, swearing in his usual patent manner in a gentle and musical monotone, as though he were reciting prayers kneeling by his mother's side. At last the horse was caught, and the chickens were fed, and Nellie was chained up to keep guard over the Californian estate. Robert mounted his little mare Jinny and said some words of comfort and apology to the pointer.

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"Poor old Nellie, woman," he said; "I hate to leave you by yourself. But you must keep the house and ranch safe for your mistress. And I've given you an extra supply of bones. And we'll go hunting soon, old girl, I promise you."

Nellie went the full length of her chain, and watched the two men canter off.

When she could no longer watch, she listened, every nerve intent; and when at last the sounds of the horses' hoofs had died away in the distance, she heaved a deep sigh, and after the manner of all philosophers, resigned herself to an extra supply of bones.

## CHAPTER II

### HILDA COMES

THE next morning after Robert Strafford had gone off to town to meet Hilda, Ben Overleigh went to his friend's house and put everything in order, and after having paid special attention to the arrangement of his moustache, he set out to visit Miss Dewsbury, the deaf lady, intending, if possible, to coax her piano out of her. He was a great favourite of hers, and he was indeed the only person who was not thoroughly frightened of her. She was quite seventy years of age, but she had unending strength and vitality,

## HILDA STRAFFORD

and worked like a navvy on her ranch, only employing a man when she absolutely must. And when she did employ any one, she mounted to the top of the house, and kept watch over him with an opera-glass, so that she might be quite sure she was having the advantage of every moment of his time. The boys in the neighbourhood often refused to work for her; for, as Jesse Holles said, it was bad enough to be watched through an opera-glass, but to have to put up with all her scoldings, and not be able to say a word of defence which could reach her, except through a trumpet — no, by Jove, that was n't the job for him! Also there were other complaints against her: she never gave any one a decent meal, and she never dreamed of offering anything else but skimmed

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milk which people did not seem able to swallow. They swallowed the opera-glass and the trumpet and the scoldings and the tough beef, but when it came to the skimmed milk, they felt that they had already endured enough. So the best people in the valley would not work for Miss Dewsbury — as least, not willingly; and it had sometimes happened that Ben Overleigh had used his powers of persuasion to induce some of the young fellows to give her a few days' help when she was in special need of it; and on more than one occasion, when he could not make any one else go to her, he had himself offered her his services. Thus she owed him some kindness; and moreover his courtliness and his gentle voice were pleasing to her. He was the only person, so she said,

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who did not shout down the trumpet. And yet she could hear every word he uttered.

This morning when he arrived at her house, she was vainly trying to hear what the butcher said, and the butcher was vainly trying to make himself understood. She was in a state of feverish excitement, and the butcher looked in the last stage of nervous exhaustion.

"You've just come in time to save my life," he said to Ben. "For the love of heaven, tell her through the trumpet, that beef has gone up two cents a pound, that she can't have her salted tongue till next week, and that she has given me seven cents too little."

Then Ben of the magic voice spoke these mystic words through the trumpet, and the butcher went

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off comforted, and Miss Dewsbury smiled at her favourite; and when he told her that he had come to ask a special favour of her, she was so gracious that Ben felt he would have no difficulty in carrying out his project. But when she understood what he wanted, things did not go so easily. To be sure, she did not use the piano, she said, but then that was no reason why any one else should use it for her. Ben stood waiting patiently until she should have exhausted all her eloquence, and then he stooped down, and quietly picked one or two suckers off a lemon-tree, and took his pruning-knife from his pocket, and snipped off a faded branch. After this, with quiet deliberation, he twirled his great moustaches. That settled the matter.



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"You may have the piano," she said, "but you must fetch it yourself."

Ben did not think it necessary to add that he had already arranged for it to be fetched at once, and he lingered a little while with her, listening to her complaint about the men she employed and about their laziness, which she observed through the opera-glass. Ben was just going to suggest that perhaps the opera-glass made the men lazy, when he remembered that he must be circumspect, and so he contrived some beautiful speech about the immorality of laziness; he even asked for a glass of skimmed milk, and off he cantered, raising his hat and bowing chivalrously to the old lady rancher. Before very long, her piano stood in Robert Strafford's little house, and

## HILDA STRAFFORD

Ben spent a long time in cleaning and dusting it.

After he had finished this task, he became very restless, and finally went down to the workshop and made a rough letter-box, which he fixed on to a post and placed at the corner of the road leading up to his friend's ranch. Two hours were left. He did a little gardening and watered the tiny grass-plot. He looked at the sky. Blue-black clouds were hovering over the mountains, obscuring some and trying to envelop others.

"We are in for a storm," he said. "It is making straight for this part from Grevilles Mountain. But I hope it won't come to-night. It will be a poor welcome to Bob's wife, though it's about time now for the land to have a thorough good drenching."

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He looked at the pretty valley with its belt of trees, seen at its best from the hill where Robert's house was built. At all times of the year, there was that green stretch yonder of clustering trees, nestling near the foothills, which in their turn seemed to nestle up to the rugged mountains.

"Yes," he said, as he turned away, "those trees make one home-sick for a wooded country. These wonderful ranges of mountains and these hills are all very well in their way, and one learns to love them tremendously, but one longs for the trees. And yet when Jesse Holles went north and came back again, he said he was glad to see the barren mountains once more. I wonder what the girl will think of it all, and how she will take to the life. The women suffer miseries of home-sickness."

## HILDA STRAFFORD

He stood thinking a while, and there was an expression of great sadness on his face.

"My own little sweetheart would have pined out here," he said softly; "I can bear the loneliness, but I could not have borne hers. Poor old Bob," he said regretfully, "I almost wish he had not sent for her: it is such a risk in this land. I don't wonder he is anxious."

He glanced again at the threatening clouds, and went back to the house, took off his coat, turned up his sleeves, and began the preparations for the evening meal. He laid the cloth, changed the flowers several times before they smiled to his satisfaction, and polished the knives and forks. He brought in some logs of wood and some sumac-roots, made a fire, and blew it up with the bellows.



**"BEN LIT THE LANTERN, AND STATIONED HIMSELF  
OUTSIDE WITH IT."**

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Suddenly the frail little frame-house was shaken by a heavy gust of wind ; and when the shock had passed, every board creaked and quivered. Nellie got up from her warm place near the fire, and stalked about uneasily.

“ Damnation ! ” said Ben. “ The storm is working up. If they ’d only come before it is any worse.”

It was now seven o’clock and pitch dark. Ben lit the lantern, and stationed himself outside with it. The time seemed endless to him, but at last he heard the music of wheels, and in a few minutes the horse dashed up the hill, and Robert’s voice rang out lustily :

“ Here she is, Ben ! ”

“ Yes, here I am,” said Robert’s wife.

“ Just in time to escape the storm,”

## HILDA STRAFFORD

said Ben, coming forward to greet her, and helping her out of the buggy. "I've been awfully anxious about you both. I'll take the horse down to the barn, Bob, and then I'll fly up to see about the dinner. Leave everything to me."

So whilst Ben was unhitching the horse, Robert led his wife into the little house, and he was transfigured with pride and pleasure when she glanced round and said :

"Why, how cosy you've made it !  
And how cheerful the fire looks !  
And this dear dog ready to be so friendly. It looks like a real little home — does n't it ?"

In that one moment all Robert's doubts and misgivings were set at rest, and when Ben hurried up from the barn, the husband and wife were kneeling down and toasting them-



## HILDA STRAFFORD

selves before the fire, the dog nestling up near them, and he heard Robert asking questions about the dear old country, and Hilda answering in a voice which struck on Ben's sensitive ear as being somewhat harsh and strident. He had only time to glance hastily at her as, intent on serving up a dainty little dinner as quickly as possible, he passed into the kitchen. At last he brought it in triumphantly, hot steak cooked as only Ben knew how, and fried potatoes and chicken salad, and the most fragrant coffee. Finally, overcome with his exertions and his anxiety and his day's working and waiting, with a sigh of relief he sank back in his chair and twirled his great moustaches.

"You have been such a good friend to Bob," said Hilda, smiling at him. "I know all about it."

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"No, no," said Ben, with his easy grace, "I've only helped to get him through the time until you came out to him. The poor wretch needed cheering up. But he does not look much like a poor wretch now."

"No, indeed," laughed Robert, "and I don't feel like one."

"You've often been a great anxiety to me," said Ben, turning to Hilda. "When the mails have been delayed and your letters have not come at their appointed minute, then I have had to suffer. And once you were ill. During that period I was not allowed any peace of mind."

"In fact, you have had bad times on my account," she said brightly.

"Well, I could not bear to see him suffer," Ben said, laying his arm on Robert's shoulder. "He is a terrible fellow at taking things to



"AND HE HEARD ROBERT ASKING QUESTIONS."





## HILDA STRAFFORD

heart. There is no doing anything at all with him."

"He has suffered quite unnecessarily," Hilda answered, with that peculiar harsh ring in her voice which again jarred on Ben's sensitiveness. "I am one of the strong ones of the earth."

And she looked it. Though tired after the long journey from England, she had the appearance of being in excellent health. Her complexion was dark, and her eyes were brown, but without any softness in them. She was decidedly good-looking, almost beautiful indeed, and strikingly graceful of form and stature. But she impressed Ben as being quite unsympathetic, and all the time he was washing up the tea things and tidying the little kitchen, he found himself harping on this note alone.

## HILDA STRAFFORD

And when he had said good-bye to Robert and Hilda, and was hurrying home on his pretty little mare Fanny, he gave vent, in his usual musical fashion, to a vague feeling of disappointment, and kept up a soft accompaniment of swearing to the howling of the wind.

## CHAPTER III

### GROWING REGRETS

**I**T was now three days since Hilda's arrival; and the storm, which had been threatening for so long, had not yet broken loose. Like all the ranchers, Robert was anxious for a good deluge, but he was relieved that there was a little delay about it, for he wanted Hilda to enjoy a few days of outdoor life, and see all he had to show her on the ranch and in the garden. He seemed like a different man now that she had come out to him; and every tiny mark of appreciation which she gave, made him lift his head higher,

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and encouraged him to step more firmly over the ground. The labour, the anxiety, and the risk of his enterprise were all forgotten in the intense pride and pleasure with which he showed her what he had been doing to ensure success. He told her, with quiet confidence in the ultimate truth of his words, that his lemons could not possibly be a failure.

“You will hear many people say that there is no money in fruit-farming,” he said to her when he was taking her over the ranch and pointing out to her his pet trees. “But you need not be concerned about that. The big ranches often fail because they are too unwieldy, and some of the small ranches fail because they are not properly looked after, and because their owners have not enough capital to spend money on them, and



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to wait patiently for a good return. But a ranch of twenty-five acres carefully tended in every particular cannot help being a success. Those are my best trees yonder. They are specially fine, and I expect to net two dollars a box on them next year. I can't tell you how much care I have given to them, but you see for yourself that it was well worth while."

Hilda tried to make some appropriate remark, but the trees did not really arouse any interest in her: she was bitterly disappointed with them, for, in spite of all Robert's letters telling her that the orchard was only in its infancy, she had expected to see great groves of trees covered with lemons and oranges. And really until one learns to take a delight in the quick growth, one may well feel disappointment and perhaps

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contempt. Some amusing criticisms, with a spice of derision in them, rose to her lips, but she managed to shut them off, and followed her husband silently up the trail which led to his reservoir, on which he set great store.

"Yes," he said, "this is a thoroughly satisfactory piece of work. It cost a good deal of money and labour, but it is splendidly strong. In this dry land, it is such an immense advantage to be able to store water."

Hilda praised the reservoir, and suggested they should grow some trees there.

"Yes, indeed," Robert said eagerly, "we will have trees everywhere, and you shall choose them and settle where they are to be planted."

"Why didn't you plant some shade trees at once?" she asked.

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"The whole place is so terribly bare. I could not have believed that such a barren spot existed anywhere outside a desert."

Robert's face fell, and Hilda added quickly :

"But these are grand old mountains around us, and I daresay one gets accustomed to the bareness."

"Oh, yes," he answered, "and in time one almost learns to think it beautiful."

"Beautiful, no," she replied decidedly, "but perhaps tolerable."

"Every day," he said, almost pleadingly, "you will see a difference in the scenery. If we have some more rain, as we shall do shortly, you will see the green springing up everywhere. The most dried-up-looking corner will suddenly become jewelled with wild-

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flowers. In about three weeks' time that little hill yonder above our ranch will be covered with scented yellow lilies. Down in the valley you will find green enough to satisfy the hungriest eye, and up on the mountains where you must go on horseback, the brushwood is coming on splendidly, and all sorts of lovely flowers and shrubs are springing up. And there you will have a grand view of the surrounding mountains, and the Pacific. You will even feel the sea-breeze, and at times you will hear the sound of the waves."

He paused for a moment, and Hilda said brightly :

"I shall enjoy the riding immensely. Can I begin soon?"

"At once," he answered proudly again. "Come and make friends with Bessie, and see the side-saddle

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which I bought for you the other day. It's a Mexican one, and I think it is the safest for this country."

He had taken thought for her in every way, and she could not but notice it and be grateful for it; and as the days went on, she grew more conscious of the evidences of his kindness, and all the more anxious to do her part conscientiously. She threw herself into work to which she had been totally unaccustomed all her life, and for which she had no liking; but because she had a strong will and a satisfaction in doing everything well, she made astonishing progress, illustrating the truth sometimes disputed by ungenerous critics, that a good groundwork of culture and education helps and does not hinder one in the practical and unpoetical things of life.

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But nevertheless she recognised that she had made a great mistake. Looking back now she wondered why in the name of heaven she had ever come out to this distant land, and got herself entangled in a life which could never be congenial to her; for once there, and having seen her surroundings and her limitations, she realised that it could never be attractive to her. She had loved Robert as well as she could love any one, and when his health broke down and he had to leave England, she continued her engagement as a matter of course, and his letters of love and longing were acceptable to her, not involving any strain on her part, nor any pressing need of arranging definitely for the future. So she drifted on, and when at last the question arose of her joining him, her

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relations and friends used every opposition to prevent her. It was pointed out to her that after a London life full of many interests and possibilities and actualities, ranching in Southern California would be simply madness. She had been accustomed to companions, men and women of a certain amount of culture and refinement. How would she manage, bereft of all these advantages? The strenuous opposition with which she met, and the solid arguments advanced against her leaving the old country, stimulated her desire to go; and a sudden wave of loyalty and pity for that lonely rancher who was counting on her help and companionship, confirmed her in her intentions. She felt that if she had not been intending to keep her promise, she ought at least

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to have let him know the drift of her mind. This, and a very decided inclination for travel and adventures, settled the matter.

So she came.

And this afternoon, when she sat on the little verandah, resting after her housework, and watching Robert cultivating the eight-acre piece on the hill-slope, she realised that she had been mad. He paused for a moment and waved to her, and she waved back listlessly. She looked at the rich upturned soil, of chocolate brown, and the formal rows of lemon-trees ; at the stretch of country all around her, with scarcely a sign of human habitation ; at the great mountains, uncompromisingly stern and barren of everything except stone and brush. She watched the pointer Nellie going in front of the little grey team and





**"SHE SAT ON THE LITTLE VERANDAH."**



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encouraging them to do their work well. She glanced upwards and noticed the majestic flight of the turkey buzzards, and now she was attracted by the noise of a hummingbird who came to visit her fragrant honeysuckle creeper, and then sped on his way. Everything seemed so still and lifeless. There were no familiar noises such as greet one in the tiniest village in the old country. There was no pulsation nor throb of life. There was nothing to stimulate, — nothing in the circumstances of everyday life, nor in the scenery. With the exception of her husband, there was no one with whom to speak all through the living hours of the day.

And this was what she had chosen of her own free will. She had deliberately thrown up a life full of interests

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and distractions, and had been mad enough to exchange it for this.

She was fond of music, and would hear none.

She was fond of theatres, and she had cut herself off from them.

As for books — well, she could get them here ; but meanwhile Meredith's "Lord Ormont and his Aminta" lay unopened by her side, and the current number of the "Century" was thrown down and carelessly crumpled. But as she stooped to pick it up, she was ashamed to think how ungrateful she was for all Robert's kindness. He had filled a little book-shelf with new books for her ; he had subscribed for several of the best magazines ; he had sent for a tuner from town to tune the ear-trumpet lady's piano. She scarcely cared to read, and she had not touched the piano. A feel-

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ing of tenderness and gratitude came over her, and she sprang up, and trudged over the fields to speak a few words with her husband. His face brightened when he saw her, and he gave her a joyous welcome. Nellie ran to greet her, and the horses looked round inquiringly. For the moment she felt really proud and happy.

"You must let me help you all I can," she said gently. "I am so strong, and able to do so much. You look dreadfully tired."

"Oh, that's nothing," he said, smiling, and wiping his forehead. "Everything seems different since you came."

"If you teach me, I can do the pruning," she said; "I believe I could cultivate too."

"I believe you could," he an-

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swered, "and perhaps you think too that I am going to allow you to dig the basins for the irrigating during the summer. But you shall do the pruning, and next year, you know, there will be the curing of the lemons."

"*Next year*," she repeated slowly, and her heart sank once more.

"I've half decided to plant some walnuts," he said. "They don't bear for about nine years, but then they are very profitable."

"*Nine years*," she echoed, and a throb of pain passed through her.

But at that moment Ben Overleigh came cantering over the ranch, with a rifle in front of him and some quail which he had just shot.

"This is my first offering of quail," he said, turning to Hilda, "and I've shot them with this

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pretty little rifle which Jesse Holles is sending as a present to you. He is too shy to give it to you himself. Though you won't think him shy when you see him."

"And when shall I see him?" asked Hilda, who had brightened up considerably, and looked beautiful.

"This evening," answered Ben, glancing at her admiringly. "The fact is, I came to tell you that in about an hour's time you may expect seven callers. Lauderdale and Graham and Holles and some of the other boys intend to pay you their respects this evening. They fear lest they may be prevented later on by the storm which I've prophesied for the last fortnight, and which I shall continue to prophesy with un-failing persistence until it comes. You will find Holles most amus-

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ing if he is in good form. But he has been quite ill for the last three weeks, and is only just himself again. He made nine wills and wrote six farewell letters in twenty-one days, and he said they helped him to recover. He looked in at my place this morning and asked for a tie, and Graham pleaded for a collar, and when I heard why they wanted these articles of luxury, I thought I had better come a little earlier and warn you, as seven visitors are rather a large bunch of grapes, even in California."

"Then we will go in and get ready for them," Hilda said, delighted at the prospect of company. "How nice of Mr. Holles to send the rifle! May I fire a shot now, Mr. Overleigh? I should so much like to try."

He showed her how to use the rifle, loaded it for her, and nodded



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in approval to Robert when she took a steady aim at a mark which they had placed for her, and hit it.

"She'll do," said Ben, cheerily; "we can send her out to shoot the deer in the mountains, Bob. Perhaps she will have better luck than we do."

"Perhaps," laughed Robert, as he turned the horses homeward. "Be sure and ask Holles, Hilda, what is the greatest number of deer he has ever shot!"

Hilda promised not to forget, and hurried into the house to make her preparations for the guests.

"It will rain to-night," Ben said; "it can't help itself any longer. Just look yonder."

"Yes, I believe you are right at last," answered Robert, unhitching the horses from the cultivator.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE STORM

THE seven callers came as threatened, and Hilda began to think that perhaps there was some kind of companionship possible in the wilds of Southern California. She was delighted with these young English fellows, and sat in the midst of them, laughing at their fun, listening to their stories, and answering their eager questions about the dear old country for which they all longed.

"How does the Strand look?" asked Graham.

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"Does Tottenham Court Road seem the same as ever?" asked Lauderdale.

"Has Park Lane changed at all?" asked Holles, putting on airs of great superiority.

In spite of his recent illness, he was in capital spirits, and seemed to be much liked by his companions. "Yes, I've been quite ill," he said, in answer to Hilda's inquiries; "but Lauderdale nursed me beautifully, and made me drink about a dozen bottles of Elliman's embrocation, and then I got well enough to write several parting letters to my friends in England, and to make my will. And that's a very puzzling thing to do satisfactorily when you have many valuable things to leave. I left my pipe first to Lauderdale, then to Graham, then to Bob, and then to

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Ben Overleigh, and finally I kept it for myself!"

"You ought to have kept your rifle for yourself," Hilda said graciously, "though I am glad you did not. I am delighted to have it from you, and hope to do it justice."

"A rifle is a very handy thing to have in this country," he answered. "One may want it at any moment for a coyote, or a jack-rabbit, or a Mexican."

"Or perhaps a deer!" suggested Hilda, slyly.

They all laughed at that, and Jesse Holles as heartily as any one, and then Ben said he thought they ought to be starting home. It was evident that none of them wanted to go, and Holles, being particularly fond of music, was looking at the piano; but Ben seemed anxious about the

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weather, and insisted on their leaving at once with him. They called him the High Binder, explaining to Hilda the exact meaning of a High Binder, and his mysterious and subtle influence over his Chinese compatriots, whom he ruled with an iron rod.

"Just see how we all quail before him," said Holles, who had been talking incessantly the whole evening; "and no doubt you've observed how speechless we are in his presence. He has only to wag his pig-tail and we go flat on our faces at once."

"Don't be such a confounded ass," said Ben, laughing. "Come along, boys."

"All right, man alive," said Holles, "but at least let me finish this piece of cake first. We don't get cake like this at your place, Ben. Do you know, Mrs. Strafford, when we want

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to kill coyotes, we get Ben to make us some of his best sponge-rusks. That does the trick at once!"

"Why don't you give them to the deer also?" suggested Hilda, mischievously. There was a shout of laughter at this, and Robert lit the lantern, and opened the door.

"It's raining, boys," he said; "and what's more, it is coming on harder."

"Hurrah for California!" sang out Graham; "we shall all make our fortunes."

"Yes," said Robert Strafford, "we shall all be saved if the country gets a thorough good drenching. But you will be pretty well sprinkled by the time you reach home."

"Never mind," replied Holles, cheerily. "I'm the only delicate one, you know, and the others won't

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take much harm, being of coarser fibre. And I have nothing on to spoil except the High Binder's tie, which I will put in my pocket. So good-night, Mrs. Strafford, and three cheers for yourself and Bob and dear old England."

The High Binder and the seven other callers gave three ringing cheers and cantered off to their homes. Long before they reached their destinations, the storm broke forth with unbridled fury. The rain poured down in torrents, gaining in force and rage every moment. The wind suddenly rose, and all but swept away the riders and their horses, and shook to its very foundation the frail little frame-house where Robert and Hilda were watching by the log-fire, listening to the cracking and creaking and groaning of the boards.

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The wind rose higher and higher. It seemed as though the little house must assuredly be caught up and hurled headlong. Now and then Nellie got up and howled, and Hilda started nervously.

"It's all right," Robert said reassuringly. "The wind will soon drop, and as for the rain, we have wanted it badly. We should all have been ruined this year, if the wet season had not set in. It's all right, Nell. Lie down, old girl."

But the wind did not drop. Hour after hour it raged and threatened, and together with the tremendous downpouring of the rain, and the rushing of the water in streams over the ground, made a deafening tumult.

"I wish we had kept those boys," Robert said once or twice. "It is not fit for any one to be out on such



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a night. When these storms come," he added, "I always feel so thankful that Ben urged me to buy land on the hill-slopes rather than in the valley. Three years ago there was fearful damage done in the valley. One of the ranchers had eight acres of olives completely ruined by the floods from the river. You must see the river to-morrow. You saw it yesterday, did n't you? Well, you will not recognise it after a day or two if the rain continues. And from the verandah you will hear it roaring like the ocean."

Later on he said :

"I rather wish I had n't filled up my reservoir so full with flume-water. It never struck me to make allowances for the rain coming, idiot that I am. But there is a good deal of seepage going on, and I thought

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I might as well fill it up to just below the overflow."

"You are not anxious about it?" she asked kindly.

"No, no," he said, cheerfully; "but I shall go out early to-morrow morning, and raise the flood-gate, just to be well on the safe side. One can't be too careful about reservoirs. They are the very devil if the dam bursts. But mine is as solid as a fortress. I'd stake my life on that. I worked like ten navvies over that earth dam. I used to feel rather like that man in Victor Hugo's 'Toilers of the Sea.' Do you remember how he slaved over his self-imposed task?"

"Poor old Bob," she said, bending over him, and speaking in a gentler voice than was her wont, "and you are not in the least fit for

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such hard work. I believe you have worn yourself out; and all for me, and I, if you only knew, so little worthy of it."

"I wanted our little ranch to be just as compact as possible," he said, "so that I might offer to you the best I could in this distant land. As for myself, I am perfectly well, now you've come out to me: only I am always wishing that I could have made a home for you in the old country. I never forget it whatever I am doing."

He seemed to be waiting for an answer, but Hilda was silent, and when at last she spoke, it was about her seven callers, and the next moment there was a terrible blast of wind, and the door was blown in and hurled with a crash to the ground. After that, their whole attention was

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taken up in trying to keep out the rain, and in securing the windows, until at last, worn out with their long watch, they slept.

Hilda dreamed of England, and of everything she had left there. She dreamed that she heard Robert saying: "*And next year there will be the lemons to be cured.*" "*Next year,*" she answered, and her heart sank.

Robert dreamed of the eight acres of olives ruined by the floods three years ago, and of his own ranch situated so safely on the hill-slope, and of his reservoir. He dreamed he was still working at it, still strengthening the earth dam, and still scraping out the cañon so as to have room for about five hundred thousand gallons of water.

"*It's nearly done,*" he said; "*about*



"HE LIFTED A PIECE OF IRON PIPING."



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*three weeks more, and then I'm through with it."*

At six o'clock he woke up with a start, and found the storm unabated in strength and fury. Suddenly he remembered about his reservoir, and, seized with a sudden panic, he flung out of the house, and, fighting his way through the rain and wind, crossed the ranch, and tore up the trail which led to the reservoir.

For one second he stood paralysed.

The water was just beginning to flow over the earth dam. He had come too late, and he knew it. He lifted a piece of iron piping which lay there at hand, and he tried to knock out the flood-gate, but the mischief was done. In less than ten minutes, the water had cut a hole five feet deep in the dam, and was rushing down the ranch, carving for

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itself a gully which widened and deepened every second.

In the blinding rain and wind Robert Strafford stood helpless and watched the whole of the dam give way: he watched the water tearing madly over the best part of his ranch: he saw numbers of his choicest lemon-trees rooted up and borne away: he saw the labour of weeks and months flung, as it were, in his face. And he was helpless. It was all over in half an hour, and still he lingered there, as though rooted to the spot, — drenched by the rain, blown by the wind, and unconscious of everything except this bitter disappointment. But when his mind began to work again, he thought of Hilda: how it was through him that she had left her home and her surroundings and all her many interests,



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and had come to him to this far-off country, to this loveless land, to this starved region — yes, to this starved region, where people were longing and pining for even a passing throb of the old life, for even a glance at a Devonshire lane or a Surrey hill; for some old familiar scene of beauty or some former sensation of mental or artistic satisfaction; for something — no matter what — but just something from the old country which would feel like the touch of a loved hand on a bowed head. He was holding out his arms, and his heart and whole being were leaping towards the blessed land which had nurtured him: even as tiny children cry out for their mother, and can be comforted and satisfied by her alone. Ah, his thoughts of, and his desires for his old home, had broken down the

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barrier of control, and were tearing wildly onwards like that raging torrent yonder. And the more he desired the dear old country and thought of it, all the more bitterly did he reproach himself for taking Hilda away from it, for urging her to come and cut herself off from the things most worth having in life — *and for what?* To share his exile, and his loneliness, and his failure. That was all he had to offer her, and he might have known it from the beginning, and if he could not save himself, at least he might have spared her.

At last he turned away suddenly, and, battling with the storm, made his way home. Hilda ran out to meet him.

“Robert,” she said, seeing his pale face, “I’ve been so anxious — what has happened? — what is the matter?”

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“Do you hear that noise?” he said excitedly; “do you hear the roar of that torrent? It is our reservoir let loose over our ranch. How do you like having married a man who has failed in everything?”

## CHAPTER V

### DOWN BY THE RIVER

ALL through that most miserable day Hilda gave him the best of her sympathy and kindness ; but even her best was poor of quality and scant of quantity, and it did not avail to rouse him from his despair. She was too new to Californian life to understand the whole meaning of the morning's misfortune, and apart from this, her power of comforting lacked the glow and warmth of passionate attachment. Still, she gave to her uttermost farthing, but nothing she could do or say had the effect of helping him. He crouched by the

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fire, a broken man seemingly, now and again piling on the sumac-roots, and sometimes glancing at her as she passed to and fro busy with the affairs of their little household. She served the mid-day meal and urged him to break his fast, but he shook his head, and drew nearer to the fire. At about three o'clock, there was a lull in the storm, and the rain ceased.

Hilda, who was feeling utterly wretched and perplexed, went out to the verandah and listened to the roar of the river, and saw a silver streak in the valley which two days before had been perfectly dry. She had laughed when she was told that the sandy waste yonder was the great river. Now, looking at it, she was seized with a strong desire to go down and stand near it, and she was just debating in her mind whether she could

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leave Robert, and whether she could get through the day without some kind of distraction, — no matter what, but something to brace her up a little, — when she saw a figure coming up the hill, and at once recognised Ben Overleigh. A strong feeling of relief and hope took possession of her. Ben would stay with Robert whilst she went out and saw what there was to be seen, and then she would come back refreshed in mind and body. He would know how to comfort Robert, and as for herself, she was quite conscious that she brightened up in his presence, and felt less hopeless too about this lonely ranch life when she remembered that he was a neighbor and their friend.

“Well,” he said, greeting her, “and so you’ve seen a typical Californian rain-storm. I tell you, you are lucky

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to be on the hill. I should n't wonder if there was a great deal of damage done in the valley. And the storm is not over yet. This is only a lull, but I thought I would just come over to see how things have been going with you. Where is Bob?"

"Bob is inside, crouching over the fire," she said.

"He should take you down to see the river," Ben said. "It is a tremendous sight."

"I half thought of going by myself," she said gloomily, "if only for the sake of a little distraction. Bob is in trouble; we are both in trouble. The reservoir burst this morning."

"Good heavens!" said Ben, "and you talk of it as though your band-box had burst, and that was all."

She darted an indignant glance at

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him as he opened the door hastily and went into the house. He laid his hands heavily on Bob's shoulders and said: "Cheer up, old man. I've come to smoke a pipe with you."

"Ben, old fellow," Robert Strafford said, looking up, and feeling at once the comfort of his presence.

There was no talk between them: they sat together by the fireside, whilst Hilda lingered outside on the verandah.

At last Robert spoke.

"My best trees are gone," he said half-dreamily; "the best part of my ranch is ruined."

"We'll redeem it," Ben answered, "you and I together."

Robert shook his head.

"There's no redeeming it," he said quietly; "I've made another





"THERE WAS NO TALK BETWEEN THEM."



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failure of my life, and dragged the girl into it this time. And I can't forgive myself. And she has been so good and patient all through this wretched day. She has not come out to anything very gay, has she?"

For the moment Ben's thoughts turned sympathetically to Hilda, and he regretted his hasty words. No; Bob was right: she had not come out to anything very gay: a barren life, a worn-out worker, and a ruined ranch, — not a particularly sumptuous marriage portion for any one.

"I think I shall take her down to the river," he said suddenly. "She half wanted to go, and it is not safe for her alone."

Robert nodded as though in approval, and showed no further interest in outside things. Ben saw that it was better to leave him alone, and

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slipped out quietly, having asked no questions about the reservoir. But he soon saw for himself that the finest part of Robert's ranch was a scene of desolation, and his heart ached for his friend. Then he came round to the honeysuckle verandah, and saw Hilda still standing there. She looked utterly listless and depressed.

"May I take you down to the river?" he asked, in his own kind way. "Bob is better alone, and the walk will do you good. Put on some thick boots, for the mud is something awful. You don't mind heavy walking?"

"No, indeed," she answered eagerly, "I shall be glad to come."

In a few minutes they were making their way down to the valley, now sticking in the mud, and now

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going valiantly onwards without interruption. At first Ben could not bring himself to speak of the trouble which had befallen his friend; he felt as though Hilda did not understand, or as though she did not care. Yet it was impossible that she did not care. No, she was, so he argued, probably one of those reserved characters, who keep their emotions in an iron safe, proof against all attacks. But at last he could no longer keep silent on the subject which was uppermost in his thoughts.

"It is a most disastrous affair, this bursting of the reservoir," he said. "Bob slaved like a nigger at that earth dam. I never saw any fellow work so hard. And there never was a doubt in our minds about it being as firm as a rock. He has not told me a word about it yet, and I did

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not like to ask. He will tell me in his own time."

"He had filled the reservoir too full," Hilda said, in her grating voice. "I can't imagine why he did such a ridiculous thing when he knew the rain was coming. And then there was some trouble about the flood-gate. It would not act properly. That is how it has occurred: at least so he told me. Day after day he put off looking after that flood-gate, until it was too late. I am dreadfully sorry about it all, but I cannot think why he did not take proper precautions. I would not say that to him, of course, but it seems to me that it might have been prevented if—"

"If Bob had not been utterly worn out," said Ben, brusquely.

"Well, it is altogether most unfortunate," she said indifferently.

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Ben glanced at her keenly, scarcely knowing how to control his indignation at her cold criticism of his friend. He was trying to make out what manner of woman she really was, trying to divine what kind of heart she had, and what degree of intelligence; for she apparently did not realise the seriousness of the disaster, and talked of it as though it were something outside her, in the consequences of which she had no part.

"I scarcely think this is the moment for criticism," he said suddenly; "it is the moment for generous sympathy. Bob will need everything we can give him of help and kindness."

"Do you suppose I don't know that?" she asked coldly. "Do you imagine that I am intending to make things harder for him? What do you suppose I am?"

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"I suppose you are what you are," Ben answered, in his quiet deliberate way, "a new-comer to California, ignorant of our lives out here, our struggles, our weeks and months and years of unaccustomed toil, and our great anxieties, and our great disasters. Your ranch is practically ruined. All those trees would have borne splendid lemons next year. Bob has tended them with special care. Now they are swept away. The part of your ranch which is left uninjured by the bursting of the reservoir, is the newly planted part. About two or three months ago, I myself helped Bob to put in the trees. Now he will have to begin all over again. And it is just crushing."

He paused for a moment, and even in the midst of his exasperation at her indifference, and in spite of his



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sympathy with Bob, he felt a rush of kindly feeling towards her. There she was amongst them in a foreign land, with none of her own people and none of her former interests, — no, she had not come out to anything very cheerful: and at twenty-four, and three weeks married, one has a right to expect some satisfaction out of life.

“But I am not a very gay companion,” he said, with sudden cheeriness. “You have had enough sadness for one day, and here am I doing my level best to add to it. Holles always says that if I had chosen, I could have written an admirable Book of Lamentations.”

“He is a most amusing boy,” Hilda said, smiling in spite of herself.

“One day when he is in good

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form you must make him tell you his adventures on a fishing expedition," said Ben. "And some day you must ask him about his famous quarrel with the ear-trumpet lady, your only neighbour. He does just what he likes with us all, and we're ridiculously fond of him. That is his place right over there, across the river. And now what do you think of the river? Stay, let me go first and test the way across the meadows, and you must follow exactly in my footsteps, and we will get up to the very bank of the torrent. Don't choose your own path. The ground is fearfully soft, and you may be mired if you're not careful. Would you rather not go?"

"Indeed not," she said eagerly; "I am ready for anything."

She had forgotten all her troubles

## HILDA STRAFFORD

and depression, and, buoyant with vitality and eagerness, followed after him, calling out sometimes when he looked back, "I'm all right, Mr. Overleigh."

At last they stood together by the side of the river, and were able to see the wholesale destruction which the storm had wrought. Three days ago there had been no water in the river; now there was a raging torrent, which was cutting down the banks, tearing up the trees, and bearing them away in fierce triumph.

First the topmost branches of a fine sycamore shuddered slightly; then they trembled, and those who were watching them, knew that the tree was doomed. The roots cracked and groaned, and something snapped. And the tree fell. Perhaps there was a moment of resistance even

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then—but all in vain. The torrent rushed with redoubled fury on its victim, and whirled it away.

There is a sad fascination in watching such a scene as this. You feel you must wait to see whether that tree yonder will be spared. You do not think it possible that it too will yield to the enemy. The others went, but they were fragile and unstable. This one surely will have the strength to withstand all attacks. You watch, and you turn away perhaps to see the bank a few yards farther down, cave in and disappear; or it may be that you yourself have to step back and save yourself from slipping down with the ground which has given way. You hear a crash—and there is your tree fallen! You feel like holding out your arms to help a friend. You feel the despair



**"HILDA COULD NOT LEAVE THE SPOT."**



## HILDA STRAFFORD

of knowing that you cannot help. The torrent seizes your tree, attacks it with overwhelming force, and sweeps it onwards, onwards. And you linger there, remembering sadly that there is one tree less in a barren land, where every green branch is dearly prized; one tree less in that belt of green in the valley, so soothing and restful to the eye through all the months of the year.

Hilda could not leave the spot. She was so excited and interested, and so concerned at seeing the trees rooted up, that Ben began to wonder whether he would ever get her home again; and indeed every moment something fresh was occurring to attract their attention. Now a window and now a door tore past, and now a great olive-tree, and now a pig, and now a pump.

## HILDA STRAFFORD

"We must be starting for home," he said at last. "The storm will be coming on again. Do you see those threatening clouds yonder? My word, there has been a tremendous deal of damage done already, and we've not finished with it yet. I hope to goodness none of those boys have suffered. Their land lies low, and this river is cutting away the country right and left."

She turned to him with sudden eagerness.

"It's tremendously exciting," she said, clasping her hands over her head, and drawing a long breath. "If you have not seen anything of the kind before, it works you up to a terrible pitch. I don't know exactly what it makes one feel like: one does not think of oneself or one's own concerns: one just watches and wonders."



## HILDA STRAFFORD

"Come," he said, looking at her with fresh interest, for her eagerness and animation were giving an added charm to her personality. "Come, before we are caught by the rain. Robert will be anxious."

"Robert will be anxious," she echoed dreamily, and at once the brightness faded from her face. It was as though some sudden remembrance had quenched her vitality and her interest. She followed Ben over the meadows, and when they had gained the road safely, she glanced at the scene which they had left, and then turned slowly homewards. There was something in her manner which forbade conversation, and Ben walked by her side, twirling his great moustaches, and wondering how things would eventually work themselves out between Robert and herself.

## HILDA STRAFFORD

His own feelings towards her this afternoon were a curious mixture of resentment and attraction. He was almost angry with himself for being attracted towards her, but he could not help admiring her face and her strength and her whole bearing. She stalked by his side like a young panther. She was as strong as he was, stronger perhaps, and with more vitality in her little finger than poor old Bob in his whole tired body.

At last she spoke.

"Mr. Overleigh," she said, "you and Robert have been great friends together for a long time now?"

"Why, yes," he answered brightly. "This is the land of friendships, you know."

"I am glad to hear it is the land of something beautiful," she said bitterly.

## HILDA STRAFFORD

"Does it frown to you so very much?" he asked kindly.

"Yes," she answered almost fiercely. "Terribly."

"But if we have a beautiful spring, you will think differently of it," he said.

"No, no," she replied, standing still for the moment; "nothing could make me like it. It is n't only the scenery — it's everything: the isolation, the fearful distance from home, the absence of stimulus. One does n't realise this at home. If one only realised it, one would not come. Nothing would make one come," she continued excitedly, "neither love nor friendship, nor duty nor regret; and as for ambition to carve out a new career for oneself — good heavens! if I were a man, I would rather starve in my old career."

## HILDA STRAFFORD

Her thoughts, till now locked in her heart, were leaping into freedom.

“Oh,” she said, “if you only knew what a relief it is to me to speak out to some one. I have been suffocated these last days, and every hour it has been getting worse. I’ve written letters — oh, yes, I’ve written letters and torn them up in despair. The distance is so great, that it paralyzes one. You can’t send a chronicle of misery six thousand miles. It’s just absurd mockery to do it. It’s only a caricature of your depression. It helps you a little to write it, and then you must tear it up at once, and that is all the comfort you will have out of it. Oh, it is better than nothing: anything is better than nothing, when you have to keep silent, and when some one near you is watching constantly for your look of ap-

## HILDA STRAFFORD

proval and waiting for your word of approbation, and you cannot give either. You are simply forced to be silent. But when you are able to speak out your real thoughts to a human being, then you breathe again, as I'm breathing now."

She paused, and Ben was silent too. He did not know what to say.

"But why, why do people come here?" she continued; "what do they find here to like? What do they get in exchange for all they've lost? Why, in the name of heaven, did Robert settle in such a place? — why did *you* choose to come here? Are you going to stay here all your lives? Tell me what it all means. Tell me frankly and honestly whether you care for your life here, and whether you would not throw it up to-morrow if you could."

## HILDA STRAFFORD

"I will tell you what it all means," said Ben, slowly ; "it means that it's a land and a life for men, and not for women. We men gain in every particular : no more small clerkships for us, no more imprisonment in airless offices ; but out-of-door freedom, and our own lives to ourselves, and our own land. That is what it all means to us. To you women — well —"

"Well?" she said impatiently.

"To you women it is altogether something different," he continued, "and unless you all know how to love desperately, there is not much to redeem the life out here for you."

She laughed bitterly.

"No, apparently not much," she said. "So here, as everywhere, the women come off the worst."

"It seems to be so," he answered reluctantly.

## HILDA STRAFFORD

"Unless we can manage to love desperately," she said, in bitter scorn, "and then even Southern California can become a paradise to us. Is that what you think?"

"I think that love and friendship can make things easier, even on a lonely ranch in Southern California," Ben replied.

"The men are to have eternal freedom from airless offices and small clerkships, and to enjoy out-of-door lives, and revel in the possession of their ranches," Hilda continued; "and the women are to do work to which they have never been accustomed at home, are to drudge and drudge day after day in an isolated place without a soul to talk to, and their only compensation is to love desperately. A pretty picture indeed! Oh, well, it is folly of me to

## HILDA STRAFFORD

talk of it, perfect folly, and to you of all people, Bob's friend."

"Better to Bob's friend than to Bob himself," Ben said quietly.

She glanced up at him. There was something so soft in his voice whenever he spoke of Robert. Hilda was touched.

"You are anxious on Robert's behalf?" she said.

"Yes," he answered simply. "I am."

They walked on in silence for a few minutes.

"You see, we have been such close friends," he said, "and I nursed him through a bad illness, and learned to look upon him as my own property. He came into my life, too, at a time when I was desolate. The world seemed a desert to me. But Bob held out his hand,



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and helped me along to a green place. I have found many green places since then."

"With such a close friendship as that, you must surely resent my presence out here," Hilda said tentatively.

"Yes," he said staunchly, "I resent it most deeply, if you do not make him happy."

Hilda smiled. She liked his candour; she liked everything about him.

They had reached the road which led up to her house.

"Good-bye," he said; "I won't come in just now. I must make my way back whilst it is still fine. Tell Bob I'll be in to-morrow."

She stood watching him for a moment, and then she went home.

As she opened the door, her hus-

## HILDA STRAFFORD

band came forward to greet her, with a smile of love and welcome on his face. Everything was ready for her: the cloth was laid, the food was cooked, the kettle was boiling, there were fresh flowers on the table.

"Oh, Robert," she said warmly, "and you've done everything for me, and you so tired with the day's trouble."

"Hush," he said, smiling sadly, "the day's trouble is past."

## CHAPTER VI

### ATTRACTION AND REPULSION

THERE were three days more of incessant rain and wind, and then the storm ceased, and the sun shone brightly. On the morning of the second fine day, a waggon drove up to Hilda's house, and Holles got off, leaving Ben in charge of the horses.

"We called in to see if we could do anything for you in the village," he said, when Hilda opened the door to him.

"I should be ever so much obliged if you would bring me a sack of flour," she said; "I have just come

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to the end of my supply. Robert did not want to send our horses in yet. He says the roads are not safe."

"No, I don't suppose they are," said Holles. "But if you had been living on preserved pine-apples and empty coal-oil tins for the last week or ten days, you would be willing to risk a good deal for the sake of some flour or a piece of Porter House steak. We fellows over the river have been starving. Empty coal-oil tins and preserved pine-apples are not very fattening, are they? But there, I must n't grumble. We managed to get over to Ben one day, and he gave us one of his skinniest fowls in exchange for a large jar of my best marmalade. There was nothing on the fowl; but there never is anything on Ben's fowls, so

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we were n't disappointed. Only for goodness' sake don't tell that to him. He's awfully touchy on the subject!"

Hilda laughed, and asked about the damages done by the storm on the other side of the river.

"Graham has come off very badly," Holles answered. "His house was taken clean away, and three acres of his best olives are completely ruined. We have some fearful cuts on our land, and the poor devil of a Chinaman who had his kitchen-garden half a mile away from our place has lost everything, cabbages, asparagus, pig-tail, and all. Graham is living with us just now, and he says he must have something to eat to keep up his spirits. So I said I would risk my valuable life for the good of the whole community. The waggon and

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horses are Ben's. After I got across the river, I went and stormed at him until he hitched up. He did not want to come with me, and began swearing at me in that poetical fashion of his, until I referred casually to the skinny fowls raised on his ranch, and then he said: 'Hold hard, Jesse, I'll come with you.' So we are off together, and if you do not hear anything more of us, you will know that we have found a muddy grave!"

"Good-bye," Hilda said. "I hope you will come safely back, bringing my flour, and the mail. And some day I want you to tell me about your experiences with the ear-trumpet lady."

"All right," sang out Holles, cheerily. "Good-bye."

He stood for a moment, looking down like a shy boy.

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"We fellows are all so sorry about the reservoir," he said kindly. "If there is anything we can do to help old Bob, we're all ready and willing."

He was off quickly after that, and Hilda watched him jump into the waggon and take possession of the reins. Then he cracked the big black snake, and started away in grand style.

"Confound you, Holles!" Ben said, as they rattled over the roads. "Do drive carefully. You will be landing us in one of those holes; I'll take the lines. I don't want the waggon smashed up, and the horses lamed."

"I'm sorry, old man," Holles replied cheerfully. "I'll promise to be careful, but I cannot possibly let you drive. I always feel like going to my own funeral when you handle the whip. Here, get up, boys. Don't

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be frightened of the mud. We're not going to stick yet. Get up, boys! But, by Jove, Ben, the roads are heavy."

"They are not fit for travelling yet," Ben answered. "But you worried me into coming. It is better to give in to you and have peace."

"Grumble away as much as you like," Holles answered; "I would rather have any amount of your grumblings than one of your fowls. What on earth do you do to your fowls to turn them out so thin? You might make your fortune by exhibiting them. They're quite unique!"

"Don't chatter so much, and look out where you are going," said Ben, pretending not to notice Jesse's chaff.

Holles laughed, and drove on silently for a few minutes. Then he said:



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"That's a bad piece of luck about Bob Strafford's reservoir. Poor fellow! He will take it dreadfully to heart. And I am sorry for her too. It must be lonely for her in this part of the country."

Ben made no answer.

"I can't for the life of me understand about women," Holles continued. "If I were a fine girl like that, nothing on earth would induce me to come out to this kind of existence. Any one can see that she is out of place here."

"The women have a bad time of it in a new country," Ben said slowly. "If you talk to any one of them, it is nearly always the same story, homesickness and desolation, desolation and home-sickness. I remember last year up north meeting such a handsome woman. Her husband had

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made quite a good thing out of Lima beans, and they had everything they wanted. But she told me that she did not know how to live through the first ten years of home-sickness."

"That's a cheerful prospect for Mrs. Strafford," said Holles.

"She will probably work her way through, as they all do," answered Ben. "Women are wonderful creatures."

"You always have something to say for women," said Holles. "You ought to go back to the old country, and help them get the suffrage and all that sort of thing. You are lost to them out here. How my maiden aunt, who only lives for the Cause, as she calls it, would adore you!"

Ben smiled, and then said quietly :

"Robert's ranch has been put back at least three years. I don't suppose

## HILDA STRAFFORD

Mrs. Strafford realises that yet. But it is very hard on her, and cruel for him. He has worked untiringly, poor chap, and used every means in his power to reach success. Well, I simply cannot speak of it, Jesse. It chokes me. Look out now. There's something ahead. Don't go an inch out of the road, or we shall get mired."

As they came nearer, they saw that a cart, heavily laden with large bales of hay, had stuck in the mud. Two men were leading the horses away.

"Can we pass?" Ben asked of them.

"There's just enough room to manage it," one of them answered.

"We'll try for it," said Holles.

"Get up, boys!"

They might have been able to

## HILDA STRAFFORD

creep past in safety, but that one of the team shied at the bales of hay, and swerved about three feet from the road. In an instant, the horses were plunging in the mud, and the spring-waggon had sunk up to the hubs. Ben took the black snake, and whipped up the poor brutes, and, together with Holles, shouted, coaxed, and swore.

But they had gone down so deep that they could not free themselves. They plunged and paddled and struggled hard to drag out the waggon, until at last one of them, more faint-hearted than the other, gave up trying, and began nibbling the grass.

Ben and Holles jumped down, and walked very gingerly over the soft ground, which, in the neighbourhood of the horses' hoofs, was precisely like pea-soup. They unhitched the

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animals, who then sprang forward and gained firm footing once more. There they stood tired and panting, their long tails looking like house-painter's brushes steeped in rich brown colouring.

"I won't be worried again into bringing my team out so soon after a storm," said Ben, half humorously, as he stroked both the horses. "They don't care about a mud bath."

"It won't hurt them," answered Holles. "In fact it is a capital thing for the health. My maiden aunt used to go every year to Karlsbad for the mud baths, and after the tenth season she really began to feel the benefit of them. All the same, Ben, I am glad we had not to dig out the horses. That is the very devil. Now for the waggon. I have a brilliant idea."

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He saw a rope in the hay cart, and at once possessed himself of it. He fastened it to the pole of their own waggon, and attached it to the horses. Then once more Ben cracked the black snake, and the horses, being now on solid ground, tugged and tugged, and at last pulled out the waggon.

"You ought to thank your stars you had me with you," said Holles, as they started on their way again. "I'm so wonderfully ingenious."

He drove into the village in grand style, much elated that he and Ben had come off so easily. A great many men were gathered together at the grocery-store, which was also the post-office, and horses and buggies of every description were crowding the road: most of the horses looked as though they had been

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mired, and several of them wore an air of depression born of wounded pride. Others obviously did not care whether or not their appearance was changed for the worse, and received with stolid indifference the various uncomplimentary remarks bestowed on their tails.

This was the first time of meeting since the great storm, and every one had something to tell about his own experiences. There was anxiety expressed about the enormous earth dam of the Nagales reservoir which supplied the Flume. If it had burst, as some one reported, untold-of damage would have been done; and moreover, the whole water-supply for the summer months' irrigating would have been wasted. This was a terrible prospect, and especially so after a long drought of exceptional severity.

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But the postmaster, who was busy distributing the accumulation of several days' mail, said there was no truth in the report.

"I wish there was no truth in the news about poor old Strafford's dam," said some one. "Can't you contradict it, Overleigh?"

Ben shook his head.

"It is only too true," he said sorrowfully.

"Well, it's a miserable thing to happen, and so soon after his marriage," said the postmaster. "Are you taking his mail, Mr. Holles?"

"Yes," answered Holles. "Great powers! Is this cart-load for him? Oh, I see, it's mostly for his wife. What a stunning lot of papers! By Jove! I wish my people would send me some. The only thing I ever get from the old country is 'The



## HILDA STRAFFORD

Young Christian at Home.' And Lauderdale gets 'The Christian Household.' No wonder we are always depressed. Here, stay a moment, Ben. I'm not through with the shopping. I've nearly forgotten Mrs. Strafford's sack of flour. And I want a tin of oysters. Graham is so upset about losing his three acres of olives, that he says the only possible thing to help him is *boiled oysters on toast*. Well, now I am about ready."

With a greeting here and a nod there, the two friends drove off. Ben took the reins, and Holles sorted the mail, and seemed greatly interested in the outsides of Mrs. Strafford's newspapers and magazines, and in their insides too, for he held each one up to the light, looking through it as though through a telescope.

## HILDA STRAFFORD

"Well, I wish they were for me," he said, as he pushed them away and lit his pipe. "But I don't grudge them to her. I daresay she is terribly homesick for old England: and the mail will cheer her up. Somehow or other I feel sorry for her—don't you, Ben? What do you think of her?"

"I don't know," said Ben, slowly.

And he spoke the truth. He had thought of her constantly ever since his long walk and talk with her. He recalled her fierce distress, her sudden breaking down of the barrier of reserve, her cry of relief at being able to speak openly about the isolation and unattractiveness of the life and land. He remembered every word she had said; he remembered every gesture. In turning the whole matter over in his mind, he was torn by

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several conflicting feelings : sympathy with her suffering, indignation with himself for being able to sympathise at all with her, resentment against her for her cold criticism of Robert in the very midst of his distress, a growing suspicion that her nature had nothing to offer of tender love and passionate devotion, and an uneasy consciousness that in spite of all this, and in spite of his loyal and long attachment to poor old Bob, there was something about her personality which attracted him immensely, something gallant in her bearing, and something irresistible in her appearance. He could not but admire her, and he hated himself for it.

He did not listen to Jesse Holles's chatter, and he looked with indifference at the country smiling now in serene sunshine, and at the softened

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lights on the mountains. Holles tried to draw his attention to a few blades of grass springing up on the roadside, and as they neared Robert's house, he glanced down into the valley and exclaimed with delight when he saw the river glistening like gold. But Ben, usually so susceptible to the beauties of nature, and so enthusiastic about the varying charms of this wild expanse of scenery which he greatly loved, noticed nothing.

Then the sound of a harsh voice recalled him from his musings, and there stood Hilda.

"So you are back safely," she said brightly.

"Yes," said Holles, as he handed out her letters and papers. "We were badly mired going; but the marvel is that we did not sink up to our very eyes coming back, owing

## HILDA STRAFFORD

to the heavy weight of your mail. But, oh, how I envy it! How I should enjoy those papers! This is not a hint. It is merely an emotional observation, which I regret already."

"You need not regret it," laughed Hilda. "I hope you will all read my papers."

"We will try," said Holles, quaintly. "And here is the sack of flour. I will just lift it into the house. It is a perfectly lovely day. Spring has come!"

## CHAPTER VII

### THE GREAT MIRACLE

**T**O enjoy and appreciate to its fullest possibilities a Californian spring, let me choose, for one, to live first through a Californian summer. Then I can see the great miracle with my own eyes, watch it in its tiniest and swiftest workings, and follow it with loving wonder.

Now those plains and slopes yonder lay bare and brown for many months: everything on them was scorched up and covered with thickening dust. The sumac, to be sure, kept its greenness, and even sent out tender shoots, just to remind us perhaps that Nature was not really dead,

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but slumbering beneath her ugly garment of dust and withered growth, even as elsewhere she takes her time of rest beneath a lovelier covering of purest white. The foothills were barren of any kind of beauty: the very stones and rocks wore an uncompromising air of ugliness, and the whole country seemed to be without a single charm until the hour of sunset, and then the mountains were tinged with purple light, and the great boulders themselves appeared to have donned for the moment a suit of purple heather.

Ah, for the green pastures in other countries then, for the deep lanes, and forests of trees, for the brooks and rivers, for the grass and ferns and mosses, and for everything in Nature soothing to the eye and comforting to the spirit!

## HILDA STRAFFORD

But as time went on, my friends, regret and longing crept stealthily away, and curiosity and wonder took their place, for some change was coming over the country, almost imperceptible and most mysterious. There was no rain, but the night-fogs cast their moisture on the dried-up bush and starved-looking chaparral. Tiny leaves broke forth and gave the first sure sign that the long summer sleep was over. And surely those hills had lost their former crude brown colouring, and had mellowed into tenderer tints. There was a softening spell over everything, and a strange sense of unrest. The heavens looked troubled, and threatened rain at last. But still no rain came, and yet one might see how the fresh growth was struggling to assert itself unaided. Then, after



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many days of waiting, the rains fell.

And Nature began to work her beautiful miracle. She had delayed so long that she had to work quickly ; but those who cared enough, could follow her in every detail.

A few faint signs of grass on the roadside, the palest shimmer of green on the slopes, fine little leaves springing from the ground, a tiny flower here and there, and in the cañons frail ferns.

Then a luxuriance of green : vast expanses of young fresh grain on the foothills and in the great plain yonder : stretches of emerald grass almost dazzling in its intensity, with a dash of even brighter colour, matched only by the sea-moss on the rocks : green fields of pasture in the valley, and on the heights green brushwood

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spread like a soft velvet mantle over the distant ridges.

And then the flowers springing up in places where neither growth nor life seems possible.

Carpets of the little pink blossom of the alfilaria, the first spring flower : carpets of the golden violets charged with delicious fragrance, and of the shooting-stars, so dainty with petals of white and delicate purple, and so generous of sweetest perfume.

Colours of every hue : masses of wild hyacinths, pale lavender in shade, thousands of yellow flowers varying from a faint tint to a deep orange : blue, pink, red, purple flowers, any you will, and amongst them delicate white ones of many lovely designs.

And the splendid poppy flaming and flashing in the sunlight, and the

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rich indigo larkspur, and the vetches and lupins and the lilies — how can one tell of them all, and how can one describe the gladness and gratitude and wonder which their presence calls forth?

And then in cañons and timbered hiding-places, known only to those who pry and probe, many a curious and lovely flower. And as the weeks go on, fresh treasures, revealing themselves in place of those which have passed out of sight: glorious monster poppies of crinkled white satin, and yellow hairy mariposa lilies, just like luscious yellow butterflies. Vines and creepers trailing on the ground, and festooning shrubs and rocks; sweet scents wafted now from here and now from there, and now mingling together in fragrant accord.

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And all these wonders tenfold more wonderful because of that burnt and dried-up soil from which nothing beautiful seemed possible.

But stay! The summer is here once more. The foothills are brown again: the slopes and plains where the grain has been grown and cut, have chosen for themselves the colour of old gold plush. Brown and old gold: surely a charming combination.

Is it that familiar scenes take on an ever-increasing beauty? Is it that the more intently we look, all the more surely do we see fresh loveliness; just as when gazing into the heavens at eventide, first one star reveals itself to us, and then another? Or is it that we know spring will come indeed, bringing those treasures which enchanted us?

## CHAPTER VIII

### ROBERT TAKES HEART

SO every day the country put on fresh beauties, and Robert was a little comforted to see that Hilda took pleasure in watching the quick growth and marking the constant change in the scenery.

“When the wild-flowers are at their best,” he said, “you will begin to think that Southern California is a beautiful land after all. That foothill yonder will be aglow with orange-coloured poppies, and those other slopes over there across the river will be covered with brightest mustard. I admire the mustard more than anything.”

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She smiled at him, and found something kind to say about all the wonderful surprises in store for her, and she seemed so appreciative of the fresh charms of the country, which were unfolding themselves to her one by one, that he began to hope she might yet learn to care for the new life and the new land. He put his troubles bravely on one side, and went back to work. Hilda saw him contemplating his ruined ranch ; and when he came in, although he tried to conceal his feelings, yet his thin face wore a peculiar look of pain, which softened her almost into tenderness. He said very little about the disaster, and spoke only of filling up the wash, levelling the land, ploughing and cultivating it, and getting it in good condition for the planting of fresh lemon-trees. All this meant

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terribly hard work, and he looked really quite unfit to take the slightest exertion. Ben was anxious about him, and came over every day to help with the cultivating of that part of the ranch which had escaped damage. He pushed Bob quietly away, and took possession of the cultivator.

"Sit down and smoke, old man," he said. "You're about as fit as a kitten to do this kind of job."

Bob was glad enough to rest. He watched Ben, smoked his pipe, and smiled to hear his friend swearing at the horses.

"I'm so fearfully tired, Ben," he said. "I suppose it is the worry and the disappointment and all that. But I shall be rested in a day or two, and then I must tackle that waste land. I daresay in a fortnight's time,

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if we don't have any more rain, the ground will be solid enough to be worked."

"It will be a big business," Ben said, glancing in that direction.

"I shall have no peace until I have started it," Bob said doggedly.

"Well, we are all coming to help," Ben answered. "All the fellows are sorry, and you will have quite a little gang round you. Holles is a splendid worker when he chooses, and he will go ahead like a ship on fire for your sake."

"You boys are good to me," Bob said gratefully. "I know you will help me."

Then he added half-shyly :

"The little wife is ever so kind about the whole affair. And I do believe she is beginning to like the life out here better than she ever



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thought she would. I've been terribly worried about her, Ben. In spite of my great happiness, I feel it was selfish of me to ask her to leave England and her people, and the many pleasures and interests she has always had in her life over there."

"She need n't have come," Ben answered stoutly.

Bob smiled happily.

"No, that is just the comfort of it," he said. "She came because she cared about me. But, nevertheless, I am anxious the whole time. When anything pleases her, I cheer up a little, and lately she has taken so kindly to the riding. She will soon be a splendid horsewoman. She looks well on a horse."

"Yes, by Jove!" answered Ben, enthusiastically.

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"And the country is coming on beautifully," continued Bob. "We shall have an abundance of flowers. That will be a pleasure to her. But she does not touch the piano. She sits down beside it, looks at it, and goes away. At home she used to play by the hour."

"She will play in time," said Ben, kindly; "just leave her to choose her own moment. Some day when you least expect it, you will hear her touching the notes."

But he went away with his heart very sore about his friend; for though he believed that Hilda was trying her best to seize hold of the new life and make what she could of it, he remembered his long conversation with her, and felt that she would never be reconciled to the lot which she had deliberately chosen. She

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had not once referred to her outburst of confidence that afternoon : at first she had seemed a little nervous in his presence ; but as the days passed by and she saw him constantly, the slight uneasiness of manner wore off. She trusted to his kindness, and he knew it. He knew, too, that she liked him and looked forward to seeing him, and, for his own part, he could not but admire the brave attempt she was making to adapt herself to these difficult circumstances. It was altogether admirable. But that set expression on her face betrayed to him the real state of her mind, and he trembled for Bob. And yet he had to own that she was good to her husband. Strong as a panther herself, she did not understand much about ill-health, but she tried to save his strength. Only she did not love

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him. It was this that Ben resented in her. Still he was greatly attracted to her at times, much against his will and against his prejudices. Then he would go home twirling his moustaches, and swearing softly and continuously.

So the weeks slipped away, and Bob began to work at the ruined half of his ranch. He looked very frail, and there was something about his unrelenting doggedness which filled Ben with alarm. Nothing would induce him to spare himself over this difficult task. He might be seen at any hour of the day struggling with that stubborn land, filling up the wash-outs, now and then pausing to rest, and after a few moments returning with redoubled zeal to his tedious occupation. It made no difference to his quiet persistence

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when the other men came to help him. Ben worked alongside with him, and could not induce him to leave off; Graham, Lauderdale, and Holles rode over constantly and gave him the best of their strength and willingness, but he never relaxed for their presence; indeed they rather stimulated him to further efforts. Holles was in capital form, and kept every one in good spirits.

"I never remembered to have worked as hard as this," he said once or twice. "It just shows what a beautiful character I am, if people would only believe it. I would not have done it for myself. But I am not really properly appreciated in this neighbourhood."

Hilda liked him immensely, and was always ready to hear his unique experiences by land and by sea. She

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laughed till the tears streamed down her cheeks, for Holles had quite his own method of narrating. He told her, too, of his famous feud with the ear-trumpet lady, and how he had refused to work for her because he preferred not to be watched through an opera-glass.

"Ben does not mind being watched through an opera-glass," he said, "and I believe Bob rather likes it. But, even if I were on the verge of starvation, I would not work on such infamous conditions. No; I still have some lingering sense of dignity, and that wretched old woman will never have the benefit of my valuable services. But there! I forgot she was a friend of yours and had lent you her piano. Does she come and listen to you through an opera-glass?"

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"She came once," answered Hilda, "but she did not ask me to play, and she was particularly kind about the piano, and told me to keep it as long as I pleased. She is away now, but when she returns, I must go and see her."

"Well, I think all the better of her," said Holles, brightly. "Perhaps I will work for her."

Then he told Hilda he was passionately fond of music, and he asked her to play for him.

"I have never cared for anything so much as for music," he said gently. "It always had a mysterious influence over me. Do you know, I believe it appeals to the best part of us. Sometimes when I've been in the back-country knocking about and not knowing where I was going next, a most

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painful yearning for music has come over me, and I have positively suffered from the deprivation. At moments like that, it is an awful thing to be cut off from all possibility of easing one's longing."

Hilda made no answer. She touched the key-board, and after hesitating, she played some dainty old French gavotte. She followed it up with a mazurka by Godard.

"Did you like that?" she asked.

Jesse's face had fallen. He looked unsatisfied.

"Play me something sad now," he said. "That is the music one cares for most, because it is the truest, I suppose."

Her fingers wandered aimlessly over the notes.

"I don't know that I can play anything sad to you," she said quietly.



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"HILDA AT THE WINDOW."



## HILDA STRAFFORD

"Why not?" he asked shyly, for her manner had suddenly intimidated him.

"Because I don't believe I dare trust myself," she said, more to herself than to him.

She struck a few chords and began one of Chopin's Nocturnes. She broke off abruptly, rose from the piano, and went to the window. When she turned round again Holles had gone. He had understood.

But out on the ranch, Ben and Bob looked at each other when they heard the strains of music, and Bob's face was aglow with pleasure. Ben was glad too.

"My little wife has gone back to her music," Bob said. "Now all will be well with her. I feel as though things were going on better, and

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as though she were not fretting so much for the old country."

Then the music ceased abruptly.

"She did not finish that melody," he said, a little uneasily.

"I daresay she is tired," Ben said reassuringly.

Meanwhile Hilda rested on the honeysuckle verandah, and looked at the distant ranges of mountains, and the foothills nestling up to them as children to their parents; she listened to the sweet notes of the mocking-bird who had lately taken up his quarters on the barn; she watched the flight of a company of wild ducks; and she glanced at the garden, where the flowers were growing apace.

The camphor-trees were coming on bravely, and she was glad to see that the grass was sprouting up.

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She tried to give her mind to each separate thing which attracted her attention ; and as the sun sank, and the tender rosy glow spread over hill and mountain, she stared fixedly at the beautiful sight until it faded into a tender vagueness. And then once more Chopin's Nocturne stole on her remembrance, overwhelming her with regret and longing.

# NACHTSTÜCK, No. 4.

Einfach. Semplice.

SCHUMANN.

*Ad libitum.*

*con Ped.*

*Ped. \** *Ped. \**

*etc.*

## CHAPTER IX

### SCHUMANN'S NACHTSTÜCK

EVERYTHING went on as usual in the little community. Robert Strafford worked incessantly, and, in addition to the help he received from his friends, had engaged the

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services of a Chinaman, and had made great strides with the redeeming of his land. His father had sent him some money, and told him that he should remit a further sum in a month or two, and Robert went to a lemon-nursery at once and bought five hundred Lisbons, budded on the sour root. He was so engrossed in his ranch that he did not notice how little interest Hilda was taking in all his schemes. She seemed cheerful, and was busy from morning till night, had learnt to milk the cow, and even helped on the ranch; but Ben, who observed her closely, believed that her cheerfulness was assumed, and that her ready conversation came from the lips only, and that her eagerness for work arose merely from her desire to do battle with her regrets. But Bob

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had taken heart and courage about her; and now eased in monetary matters by his father's generous help, felt that he was at last coming out into the sunlight of life. So great was his confidence in his ultimate success, and so convincing was his dogged persistence, that, in spite of his misfortunes and his frail health, the minds of his companions leapt forward, as it were, three or four years, and the picture of a flourishing little ranch, more prosperous than any other in the neighbourhood, forced itself upon their attention.

It was nearly six weeks now since Hilda had touched the piano. But to-day Robert had gone with the waggon into the village, and she was alone on the ranch. She had been reading some of her home letters, and looking at some photographs of



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Canterbury and Winchester, half deciding to frame them, and finally concluding to put them away. She opened the piano, and placed her music on the stand. She chose a volume of Chopin, another of Schumann, and some pieces by Brahms and Grieg. She played well. Her touch was firm and virile, but wanting in tenderness. She played one of Chopin's Impromptus and one of his Ballades, and after that she passed on to his Nocturnes. She stopped now and again and covered her face with her hands. She was quite tearless. Then she played both of Brahms' Rhapsodies, and some numbers out of Schumann's Carnèval. She leaned back in her chair, looking almost like a statue. Her fingers sought the notes once more, and she played Grieg's *Ein-*

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*samer Wanderer*, which is so intensely sad.

"Jesse Holles would like that," she said to herself; "but I could never play it to him."

She paused, and her hands rested insensibly on the keys.

"Oh, I must have been mad," she said, with something like a sob, "to have so much and to give it all up, *and for what?* Ah, if one could only free oneself!"

She drifted into Schumann's *Kinderscenen*, choosing unconsciously the saddest numbers, and then she struck the arpeggio chords and began his most wonderful *Nachtstück*.

It is fraught with melancholy, regret, longing, pity — and what else besides? But surely it is idle work to describe beautiful music. As we play and as we listen, if we are lovers



**"HILDA'S SELF-CONTROL BROKE DOWN COMPLETELY."**



## HILDA STRAFFORD

of music, we use our own interpretation ; we weave our own feelings, our own emotions, our own aspirations and regrets into it, and lo ! for the moment we have made it our own language. . . . Before Hilda had reached the closing phrases of the *Nachtstück*, her self-control broke down completely. She nestled up to the piano, her arms resting on the finger-board, her head bowed over them. She sobbed unceasingly. The tears streamed unheeded from her eyes. There seemed to be no end to the sobbing, no end to the tears.

But at last she raised herself, and clasped her hands together at the back of her neck, and looked up. Her husband was standing in the doorway.

"Hilda !" he cried, and he advanced a step, his arms extended.

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“No, no!” she cried, turning from him. “I want to be alone, I must be alone, I’m too utterly wretched for words. It’s all of no use, I can’t stand this life out here; it will just kill me—it is n’t life, it is only existence, and such an existence too! I must have been mad to come—I was mad, every one was against it—my mother and father and friends, all of them. But I did n’t know what I was coming to—how could any one know?—how could I picture to myself the desolation and the deadness and the dull monotony, and the absence of everything picturesque, and the barren country, which at its best can never be comforting? I hate those mountains there, I could shake them, and I could go out and tread down all those wretched rows of wretched little trees—it’s all an

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absurd mockery of a life, it's starvation from beginning to end. You just feel that there is nothing to live for, and you cry out the whole time to be done with it. Yes, I was mad, mad to leave everything and come — I can see it well enough now, when it is too late. But it was little enough you told me in your letters. Why did n't you make me understand clearly what I was coming to? And yet you did try — I remember you tried; but how could any one ever describe the awful desolation? Oh, it's simply heartbreaking. And to think it has to continue month after month, and year after year, and that there is no escape from it. How shall I ever bear myself? How can I possibly go on, drudging all the day long? For that is what the life out here means to a woman — drudg-

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ery and desolation, and it is wickedly cruel."

Robert Strafford stood there paralysed.

"And such an unattractive place to settle in," she continued wildly, "when there are entrancing parts of the country near at hand: I saw them myself on the journey. If you had to come, why not have chosen a spot worth living in, where some kind of social existence was possible, instead of burying yourself in a wilderness like this? But nothing could ever make up to one for all one had lost, and if I were a man, I would rather starve at home in my old career than cut myself off from the throb and pulsation of a fuller life. Yes, indeed I would, and tomorrow I would turn my face homewards and thank God that I had





"ROBERT PASSED NOISELESSLY OUT OF THE  
HOUSE."

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## HILDA STRAFFORD

freed myself at last, in spite of everyone and everything, freed myself at last — oh God! when I think of it all. . . .”

Robert's face was ashen. Twice he tried to speak, and his voice failed him.

Then he said, quite quietly :

“ Never fear, Hilda, you shall have your freedom.”

He opened the door, and passed noiselessly out of the house.

## CHAPTER X

### A STRICKEN MAN

HE chose the road which led to Ben's ranch, and he went along at an almost feverish pace, not stopping to rest for a single moment, during all those seven miles. When Ben saw him, he knew at once from the terrible expression on his face that some trouble had befallen him. He led him silently into the house, pushed him gently into the arm-chair, and, with a tenderness all his own, forced him to take some food and stimulant; and then drawing his chair alongside, and lighting his pipe afresh, he waited, as close

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friends know how to wait, for the moment when the heart desires to ease itself. At last Robert spoke, but so quietly that his very manner would have awed any listener, and it filled Ben with apprehension.

"Ben," he said, "Hilda has told me to-night how she hates the whole life. She bitterly regrets having come, she bitterly reproaches me for having settled in the country, and I recognise the truth of everything she says. She yearns to be free again, and she shall have her freedom. It is the very ~~least~~ best I can do for her. But I'm a stricken man. I've been fool enough to think she cared for me—I've loved her so much myself, that it did not seem possible she could not care a little for me—and I've been fool enough to try and make myself be-

## HILDA STRAFFORD

lieve that in time she might get reconciled to this Californian life. I might have known it was never at any moment possible. I've made a wretched failure of my life and career over in England and over here, and I've earned for myself not her love, nor her tenderness, nor even her sympathy, but her scorn. Ben, I felt it in every word she said. I can never forget my humiliation, I can never forget her contempt. I could have fought through other things, but not that. If that is all one gets for all one's years of longing and labour, then the game is not worth the candle. Do you remember me telling you that the worst thing which could happen to me would be, not her changing her mind and throwing me over, but her disappointment and her scorn? Do you remember

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that? You laughed at me, and tried to chase away my misgivings, but it seems to me now that our misgivings are about the only things in our lives which cannot be called failures."

Ben drew nearer to his friend.

"Dear old man," he said, "take heart again. She was home-sick perhaps, and all the home-longings came leaping out. She could not have meant to be hard. She will bitterly regret her words, and all will be well between you again. You will forgive her, and the wound will be healed."

"There is nothing to forgive," Robert said quietly. "I don't blame her at all, but I blame myself bitterly, bitterly."

"But I blame her," said Ben, fiercely, "and face to face I shall tell her so."

## HILDA STRAFFORD

"The only thing I have against her is that she has not cared in the very least for me," Robert said, "and words cannot mend that, Ben."

He leaned back wearily in the chair, looking almost as though he had ceased to be of this world. The silence was broken only by the note of the mocking-bird, and the noise of the brown mare knocking impatiently against the stall.

"She must go home to the life which she gave up for me," Robert said, after a long pause. "I don't want her sacrifices: they are not worth anything to me. I think I have enough money left for her passage, and if not, I know you will help me out. I must give her her freedom at once."

He rose abruptly, but sank back with a groan, his hand to his heart.





“‘BEN,’ HE MURMURED, ‘WE MUST—’ HE FAINTED AWAY.”



## HILDA STRAFFORD

"Ben," he murmured, "we must —"

He fainted away.

Ben got him on the ground, loosened his shirt, tended him as he had so often done before in similar attacks, and he came back to life once more. After a time Ben put him to bed like a little tired child. He held Ben's hand, and looked into his kind face and smiled.

"Dear old fellow," he said tenderly, "dear old fellow. We must send her home, Ben," he said, as he turned his face to the wall.

Then he raised himself for a moment.

"She was mistaken about one thing," he said. "She had seen some of those settled-up parts on her way out here, and they seemed attractive to her, and she reproached

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me for not having bought land there. But you know, Ben, I had not the money for that sort of thing; you know I could not have afforded to pay fancy prices for my ranch. But it was only that she did not understand."

After that he fell asleep from sheer exhaustion, and Ben crept back into the living-room, half beside himself with indignation and anxiety. He felt he ought to let Hilda know that Robert was with him, and yet it was quite impossible for him to leave his friend. He longed to see her, and speak his mind to her about her cruelty. His whole being was at feud with her. A torrent of words rushed to his lips, and broke off into impotent silence.

There was a knock at the door. When he opened it, he found Hilda outside.

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"Robert is here?" she asked breathlessly.

"Robert is here," he answered coldly.

He had stood barring the door as it were, and now he stepped back to let her pass in.

"I must see him at once," she said, turning round defiantly to Ben.

"He is sleeping," Ben said sternly. "At least let him rest awhile."

He lit the lamp, and placed it on the table, and then looked her straight in the face.

"You have heard everything from Robert," she said, shrinking back almost imperceptibly.

"Robert has told me of his trouble," Ben answered, trying manfully to restrain his anger. But he thought of his friend stricken to the

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heart, and his indignation could no longer be smothered.

"I blame you bitterly," he said, folding his arms together tightly and towering before her. "Yes, you shall hear what I think of you. He says he has nothing against you, but I have everything against you! If you had not a heart to bring with you, and some kind of tenderness, why did you come out here? No one made you come. You could have stayed at home if you had chosen. That would have been better than this. But to come and give him nothing but scorn, and throw his failure in his face, and make him feel that you despise him for not having done better in the old country—I tell you that you are the one to be despised."

"It is not your part to talk to me

## HILDA STRAFFORD

like this," she said, interrupting him fiercely. "You are not my judge."

"And yet I do judge you," he flung out fearlessly, and then he glanced at her, and stopped short in the very heat of his anger and resentment, for her face wore a terribly strained expression of pain, and his gentler feelings were aroused even at that moment. "Ah, well," he said, "words are not of much use after all. I am so deeply sorry for him, and for you too — there is nothing I would not do to set things right for you both."

His kinder manner softened her at once.

"I never meant to speak to him as I did this afternoon," she said. "I don't know how it was that I could not control myself better, but I was just wild with regret, and the

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music had stirred me up to such a pitch that the words came tumbling out of their own accord ; and after it was all over, and he had gone, I stood there horrified with myself, and terrified for him, because I knew he cared so much. And that has been the awful part of it all through : he has cared so much, and I seemed to have cared so little. Oh, you don't realise how I've tried to take up this life. Day after day I've begun over again and struggled to put from me the dull feeling of depression, but it came back ten times worse, until I've been in despair. Naturally enough you have only seen the one side, but you would not think so harshly of me if you'd known how I have tried, and how everything has been against the grain."



## HILDA STRAFFORD

He turned to her with something of his old kind bearing.

"I know you have tried," he said slowly ; and some of the pain passed from her face when he spoke these words.

"I think I would like to see if he is still sleeping," she said, almost pleadingly.

Ben pointed to the bedroom door.

"Don't rouse him," he said. "If he sleeps long and heavily, he may wake refreshed. But I think he is very ill. He has just had one of his fainting fits, and an obstinate one too, and his state of exhaustion afterwards has made me horribly anxious."

She turned pale, and went softly into the bedroom. She came back in a few minutes, and found Ben preparing supper. He looked up at her eagerly, and was relieved when she

## HILDA STRAFFORD

told him that Robert was still sleeping soundly, and that she had not lingered lest she might disturb him.

"He was murmuring something about not being able to pay a fancy price for land," she said. "I wonder what he meant."

"He took it greatly to heart that you thought he might have bought land in a more settled part of the country," Ben replied. "But he could not have afforded to do that."

"He looks very ill," Hilda said, half dreamily.

"I have been anxious for him these many months," Ben said quietly. "He never had much strength, and he has overtaxed it with his ranch and his reservoir. It is the story of many a rancher in California."

"And I have not helped him," Hilda said.

## HILDA STRAFFORD

Ben was silent.

"I would give anything on earth to undo this afternoon's work," she said, with painful eagerness. "And it's so awful to sit here, and not be able to tell him that. I long for him to rest, and yet I long for him to wake. I don't know how to bear myself."

"You must wait," Ben said, gently.

So they waited and watched together. It was a lovely night, and the country was bathed in moonlight. The mountains were darkly outlined against the silvery sky. The world seemed to be one vast fairy-land, wrapt in mystery and peace. On such a night, a poet might have woven dreams, an idealist might have seen bright visions, and to them the hours would have faded imperceptibly like the moonlight into dawn.

But to Hilda that time of waiting

## HILDA STRAFFORD

seemed endless. She looked out on the fairy scene, and then came back gratefully to the fire which Ben had built up directly the night turned chilly. He sat near her, smoking his pipe, and twirling his great moustaches. Once when he saw her shiver, he rose and fetched a rug for her, and wrapped it around her, and threw a few more logs on the fire. They did not attempt conversation now: they sat rigidly upright, waiting for the morning to dawn. Once she drowsed a little, and when she opened her eyes again, Ben told her that Robert had called out loudly in his sleep, but was now resting quietly.

"The morning is almost here," he said; "it is half-past three."

She drowsed once more, and the clock was striking five, when she



**"SHE BENT OVER HER HUSBAND AND LOOKED AT HIS  
PALE FACE."**



## HILDA STRAFFORD

suddenly started up and stole into the bedroom. She bent over her husband and looked at his pale face. He lay there absolutely still : there was no sound of breathing — no movement of the limbs. A sudden fear seized her.

“ Ben ! ” she cried, “ Ben ! ”

Ben Overleigh heard his name, and felt a thrill of terror in her voice, and knew by the answering terror in his own heart that the dreaded trouble had come at last. Together they raised that quiet form, and strove by every means they knew to bring it back to consciousness and life. But in vain.

Then he shrank back from her, and his fiercest anger took possession of him.

“ So you have your freedom,” he said.

## CHAPTER XI

### PASSION AND LOYALTY

**T**HERE was great sorrow felt when the news spread about that Robert Strafford had died, but there was no surprise, for his friends had long since seen that he was slipping away from them, having reduced himself to the last inch of his strength through overwork and anxiety. It was an old story in Southern California, and one not rightly understood in the old country, but Ben Overleigh explained it in the letter which he wrote to Robert's father.

"We buried him yesterday," he wrote, "and his wife and we fellows



## HILDA STRAFFORD

who had known him and loved him, stood by the grave. He never had much strength, but what he had, he taxed to the uttermost. These last months he worked like one possessed. No delicate frame could stand it, and then he was unhappy about his wife, seeing her so homesick. That finished matters for him. I remember when I first met him about four years ago, I thought it sheer madness for a frail young fellow like that to come out to a life of physical toil. Ranching is not child's play, and if you want to succeed, you don't sit down and watch your trees; you work at them the whole time, and it is n't light work. To leave a city office, and come and be in the open air during the whole day sounds inviting, but some of those who try it, and have not much

## HILDA STRAFFORD

physical strength, go under. I wish this could be better understood in the old country. But I expect no one realises, until he tries for himself, what hard work manual labour really is, when one has never been accustomed to it, and knows nothing about it. Two years ago a young English doctor here died in the same way. He knew he had drained himself of strength, and that his heart was worn out. I want you to know we all loved your son, and as for myself, he leaves me bereft indeed. I shall buy his ranch, and work it together with mine. His wife will no doubt return as soon as she can, but at present there is a tremendous railway strike going on, and we are entirely cut off from the Eastern States. But some of the mails get through, and so I will risk it, and send this letter."

## HILDA STRAFFORD

Ben seemed to be quite a broken man, and went about his work as one seeing nothing and caring for nothing. Graham and Lauderdale and Holles tried their best to reach him with their kindness and sympathy; but he seemed unreachable, as though he had climbed to some distant mountain, and had cut himself off from human aid. But he liked to have Jesse Holles near him, remembering always that Jesse had been fond of Robert, and had given him many an hour of willing help. He looked after his ranch as usual, and rode over to Hilda every day without fail. He spent very little of his time with her personally, but worked on Robert's ranch, finding a melancholy satisfaction in continuing what his friend had begun. He tended the horses, and helped Hilda in many ways.

## HILDA STRAFFORD

He cultivated, he pruned, and then he came up to the house, and sat down quietly with her, watching her as she prepared tea, watching and wondering and turning over many things in his mind. He was intensely sorry for her, but he had not told her that in words, although he knew she understood it from his deeds. In spite of all that had occurred, he could not help being strongly attracted to her, and sometimes when he was alone at home, he found himself torn in pieces by his great bereavement, by his sympathy with Hilda's remorse, by his attraction to her, and his repulsion from her. Thus the storm swept furiously over Ben Overleigh. He told her once or twice that he would like to buy Robert's ranch, and he thought they would not have any difficulty in ar-

## HILDA STRAFFORD

ranging the matter. She did not make any definite reply, nor did she show any interest in his suggestion. She seemed strangely indifferent about the fate of the ranch, and about her own affairs and plans, which were being held in abeyance by the great railway strike. It was obvious, of course, that she would return home as soon as she could, but she never once spoke of home, and never once referred to the strike as interfering in any way with her own intentions. But she did speak of Robert, and then there was no mistaking the remorse in her manner, and the awe in her voice.

"I can never forget how I wounded him," she said.

Ben did not answer her on these occasions; and his silence always stung her.

## HILDA STRAFFORD

"You condemn me utterly," she said, almost pleadingly, and she showed by her intensity how much she cared for what this man thought of her. She showed it all the more as the days went on, and, after all, it was natural enough that she should turn to him as her only friend in this distant country, where she was a complete stranger. But the matter did not end there. She was strongly attracted to him, and either she could not or would not hide it. At one moment a thrill of contempt would pass through Ben, and he could have turned from her as from something which soiled his soul; and at another moment a throb of passion would possess him, and he could have thrown up everything for her, his loyalty to his friend, his sense of dignity and fit-

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ness, his own estimate of her character — everything he could have swept to the winds. He noticed, too, that as the time went on, she seemed to become more reconciled to the scenery; and indeed the country was looking entrancingly beautiful. All Robert's promises to her had come true: the foothills were powdered with gold; some of the slopes were arrayed in bright attire of orange-coloured poppies, and others had chosen for themselves a luxurious garment of wild mustard. Then there was the dazzling green grass, and the vast expanse of grain-fields, and in the distance yonder there were patches of purple and yellow flowers, reminding one of the gorse and heather in the old country. The grim barren mountains looked down

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indulgently on all this finery, like old people who have had their days of vanity, and are content to watch the young bedeck themselves so gaily. And the air was laden with the heavy fragrances of the flowers and the orange and lemon blossoms. Hilda drove out every day, and brought back endless treasures: wild lilac, wild azalea, and maiden-hair from some distant cañon. Her one consolation was to be out of the house: she drove, or she rode the pretty little mare which Robert had chosen so lovingly for her, and sometimes she strolled, taking with her a stout stick in case she came across any snakes. Nellie, the pointer, who had fretted piteously since Robert's death, went with her, and whatever she did, the dog was always to be seen following her. Hilda's health



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had not suffered from the shock which she had sustained, but she often looked anxious and desolate, and some of the people who saw her, thought she had changed sadly. They said that was not to be wondered at, considering the sad circumstances of her husband's death, and the long continuance of the railway strike, which made it impossible for her to join her friends.

But one evening whilst she was sitting on the honeysuckle porch. Holles rode up waving a paper in his hands.

"Such good news!" he cried; "the strike is over. There has been some kind of a compromise between the company and the men, and some of the mails are through. I've got a ton-load for you in this gunny-sack. Nothing for me, of course, except

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my religious paper. That never gets lost."

She put the magazines on one side, and opened her home letters. They were the first she had received in answer to her own letter telling of Robert's death. Her father wrote most kindly, enclosing an order on one of the banks to cover her passage-money.

"Of course you will come back at once," he said, "and take up your life where you left it."

The letter fell from her hands.

The old life was offered to her again. There it was waiting for her, and she was free to go and accept it, and taste once more of the things for which she had been starving.

She was free. There was no one and nothing to hinder her. She could go back, and put these sad

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events and her remorse and her great mistake away from her remembrance. She argued that one had not to suffer all through one's life for a mistake. She had not meant to be cruel to poor Robert, but she ought never to have come at all. And now she was free to go, and once at home again these months would seem to her as a time of which she had dreamed during an uneasy night.

But no sense of gladness or thankfulness came over her. She sat there, and bit her lips.

Home? What did she want with home?

She rose and went into the living-room, carelessly throwing her letters and papers on the table. The bank bill fell down, and she stooped and picked it up, and her fingers moved

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as though they were being impelled to tear it in shreds.

But she tossed it whole on to the table. She struck a match to light the lamp, but changed her mind and let the darkness creep on unrelieved.

Ben Overleigh rode up half an hour afterwards, and found her thus.

"I have come to tell you that the strike is over, and the train service begins to-morrow," he said.

"I have heard," she said rigidly.

"You must be glad to hear the news," he said. "This time of waiting must have been very trying for you."

She did not answer.

"And now at last you will be able to go home to your friends," he said.

She was silent.

"I wanted to speak to you about

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the ranch," he continued, a little nervously. "I have set my mind on buying the place, and carrying out Robert's ideas. I hope you will give me the opportunity. If you look over his papers, you will find at what figure he valued his property. I only speak of it, because I thought that the certainty of being able to sell the ranch and receive money down at once, might make it all the easier for you, now that the line is open, to arrange your plans, and return home."

"Home?" she echoed, as though in sudden pain.

Ben started.

"Yes," he said quickly, "back to the life for which you have been hungering ever since you came, back to all those interests which you threw away, and then so bitterly regretted.

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Now your path is clear before you, and you can go straight on, and forget that you ever took a side-turning which led you to uncongenial pastures. Not every one can do that."

"The old life!" she said wildly, "what does one want with the old life? What do I care about returning? Why should I go home?"

For a moment Ben Overleigh's heart leapt within him. *Why should she go home?* These words were on his very lips, and others came rushing afterwards, struggling and wrestling for utterance. The storm raging around and within him for so many weeks, now assailed him with all its fury — and left him standing as firm as those mountains yonder.

"Why should you stay?" he said calmly; "you have said all along that this Californian life was detesta-

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ble to you, and that you could never reconcile yourself to it. Have you forgotten that afternoon when you poured out your confidences to me, and eased your mind of your misery? Do you remember how you spoke of the isolation, the fearful distance from home, and the absence of stimulus, and the daily drudgery, and the mistake you had made in coming out to such a wretched land, and to such a starved existence?"

"Oh, I have not forgotten," she said excitedly; "that was the first long breath I'd taken since I left England."

"And do you remember how you said that if you'd only realised what you were coming to, nothing would have made you come," he continued deliberately, — "neither love nor friendship, nor duty nor regret; and

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that if you had been a man, you would have preferred to starve in your old career rather than settle in such a land as this?"

"Yes, yes," she broke in, "and I meant every word I said."

"And do you remember how you asked me what it was we found to like in the life," he continued, "and whether we would not throw it up to-morrow if we could, and what in the name of heaven we got in exchange for all we had lost?"

"Yes, yes, I remember," she said breathlessly; "and do you remember what you said then about the women?"

"I said that we men gained in every particular, and that it was a life for men and not for women," he answered.



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"Ah, but there was something else," she said, almost desperately. "You said they came off badly here, but that their one salvation was to love passionately, desperately —"

"And if I did say so," he said, turning to her fiercely, "what has that to do with you and me?"

There was no mistaking the ring of contempt in his voice. She smarted in every fibre of her, and instantly gathered herself together.

"No, you are right," she said, with a quick nervous laugh. "It has not anything to do with you and me."

He had struck a match as she spoke, and lit the lamp, and she came from the window where she had been standing, and pushed into a heap the letters and papers which were scattered over the table.

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"That railway strike has lasted a terribly long time," she said, in a tone of voice utterly different from her trembling accents of a few minutes past. "But now, thank goodness, it is all over, and I can arrange my plans at last. My father has sent the money for my return. But it is good of you to wish to make things easy for my journey. I shall not, however, need any more ready money, you see, for the cheque is large enough to pay my expenses twice over to England."

Ben stood there half stunned by her sudden change of manner, and by the consummate way in which she swept from her horizon the whole of this incident between them.

"And now about the ranch," she continued, with the dignity of a queen. "I will look out the papers

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to-morrow, and then we will settle it as you wish. I do not know any one to whom I could sell dear Robert's ranch with greater pleasure than to you. But you must pay me at your leisure. There is no hurry."

"Good God!" thought Ben. "A few minutes ago this woman was all but throwing herself at my feet, and now she stands there and patronises me."

He could scarcely control his anger and scorn, but he mastered himself, and said quietly:

"I shall be very grateful to have old Robert's ranch. It will be some consolation to me to take care of it and make it my own. You know we loved each other, he and I. But as for payment, I shall prefer to give the money down, at once."

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"That shall be just as you please," she said, with gracious condescension. "And now good-night. I am very tired."

She held out her hand to him, but he looked her straight in the face, bowed slightly, and left her.

## CHAPTER XII

### FAREWELL TO CALIFORNIA

A FORTNIGHT afterwards, Ben Overleigh and Jesse Holles saw Hilda Strafford off at the station. She looked very pale, and glanced at Ben uneasily from time to time. There was neither scorn nor anger in his manner now, but just the old gentle chivalry, which was the outcome of his best self. His face, too, had lost its expression of restless anxiety, and there was a dignity about his whole bearing, which might well have been the outward and visible sign of the quiet dignity of his mind, won after a fierce struggle.

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"You shall have news of the ranch," he said. "When the lemons come into bearing, you shall know."

She smiled her thanks, and turning to Jesse, she asked whether she could do anything for him in England.

"Yes," he said sadly, "kiss the dear ground for me." And he added more cheerfully: "And send me an illustrated paper sometimes."

"And for you?" she asked of Ben, hesitatingly.

"Kiss the dear ground for me, too," he answered.

And this time he held out his hand to her, and she grasped it.

Then the train moved off.

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